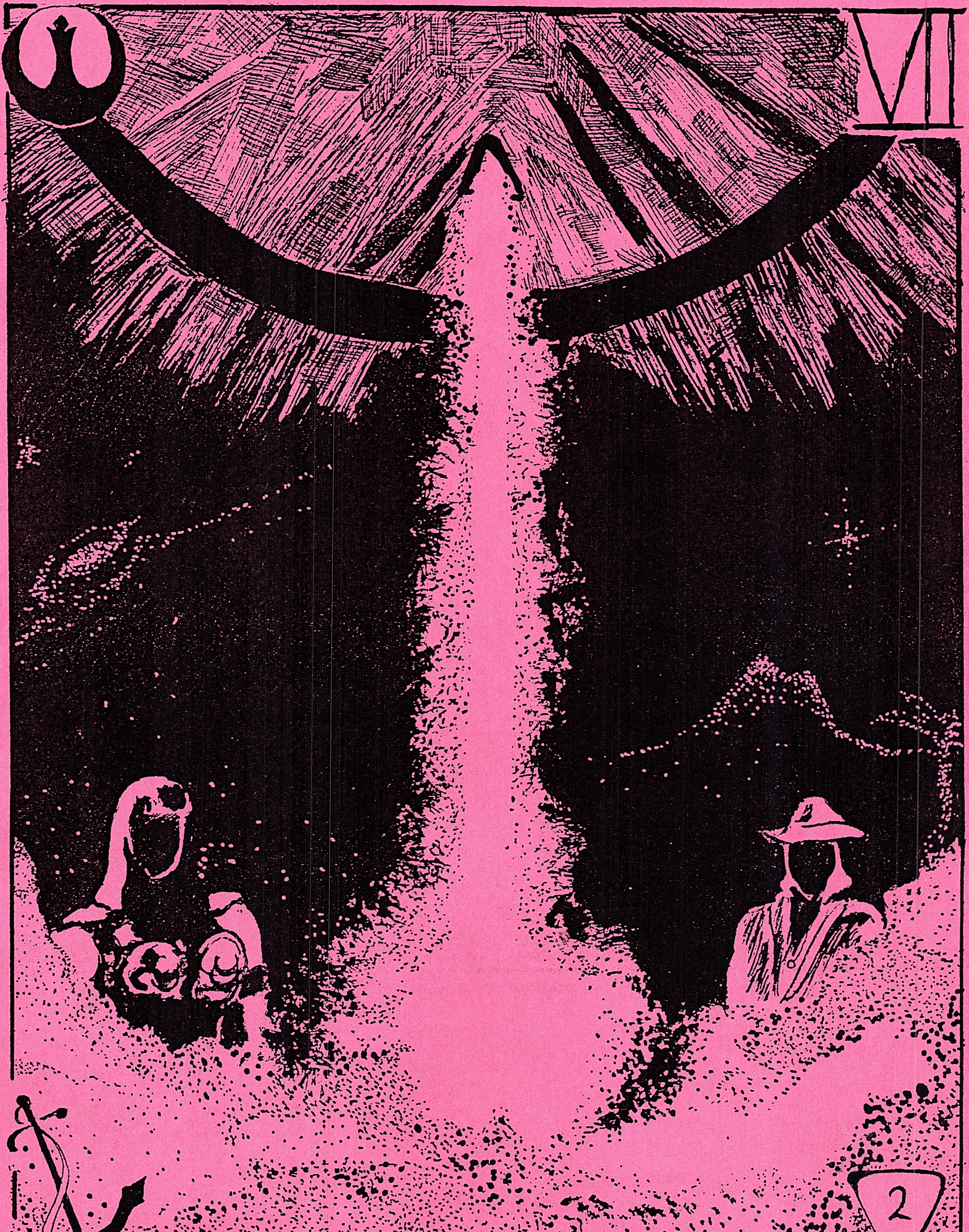
REMOTE CONTROL

a multi-media fanzine

Issue 7



REMOTE CONTROL

a multi-media fanzine

Table of Contents

Issue 7, May 1997

Eye of Apollo – Kira Bacal – Hercules 3
Archives – Dorothy Johnston – Independence Day 33
Dead Man's Boots – Joyce Strohm – ST: Voyager
Art by Barbara Eickhoff 40
Alexa – Jennifer Shipp – Highlander 55
Salvation – Kathy Kipper – Millenium/X-Files 62
New Year's Gift – L.C.Wells – Kung Fu: the Legend Continues
Art by the author 73
Dreamtime – Sheila Paulson – Real Ghostbusters 75
Possession – T.Beaty – Forever Knight 91
Corellians Ain't Tame – Z.P.Florian – Star Wars 95
Connected – Rhonda Hallstrom & Deb Parizek – Kung Fu TLC/Quantum Leap
Art by Barbara Eickhoff 100
The Five-O Affair – Bill Koenig – Man from UNCLE/Hawaii Five-O
Art by SMAP 128
Magnetic — Amanda le Bas de Plumetot
Art by SMAP 148
Tales of the Sea Wolf Tale Two: Homecoming – Nora Mayers – Anchors Aweigh
Art by C.L. Wessel 161

Cover: L.C.Wells

Remote Control 7, copyright May 1997 by Criterion Press and Kathryn Agel. This is an amateur publication and is not intended to infringe on any legally-held existing copyrights. All rights revert to the originators.

Criterion Press, c/o Kathryn Agel, 9 - 11 Ayres Court, Bayonne, NJ 07002-3510
e-mail: Criterion.Press@juno.com

THE EYE OF APOLLO

Kira Bacal

It wasn't defeating Cyclops or outwitting malevolent deities which was so tough, Hercules mused, but the itinerant lifestyle that accompanied such deeds. One more night sleeping on the damp earth, and his shoulders would be so stiff Asclepius himself wouldn't be able to stave off arthritis. Still, Coveda was just ahead, and there was an inn there with soft beds, decent food, and—

Hercules' pleasant thoughts were interrupted by a commotion in the city below. He peered down from the bluff overlooking the town, his attention caught by a large crowd near the side of the city where the inn was located. It would be just his luck if the inn were on fire.

He frowned, trying to see more clearly, and then his mouth tightened with distaste. It was something worse than a conflagration: a slave market. Hercules set his jaw and quickened his pace, moving forward with new purpose.

A crude platform had been set up among the stalls in the town marketplace, and the auction was already underway as Hercules entered the outskirts of the village. Several unfortunates huddled against one side of the stage, weighted down with chains and guarded by several large, armed men.

The slave merchant addressed the sizable crowd, his mind already tallying his profits. "Come and see what wonders the king's guards have obtained for you! Look at these marvelous specimens of strength, beauty ..."

The crowd waited politely as he motioned for one of the guards to bring the first slave forward. The man grabbed the nearest one, a terrified-looking young woman who instinctively cringed back. The guard, angered by the apparent show of resistance, raised his club, but before he could bring it down, he was knocked off balance by a shove from another prisoner. He staggered, then furiously spun to confront his attacker.

The guard was momentarily nonplused to find that his assailant was a tall woman who glared at him contemptuously, seemingly oblivious to the slave collar and chain adorning her neck. Arms akimbo, she looked him over, her voice dripping scorn. "Why don't you attack someone your own size, you fat coward? Or are there no giant slugs in this barbaric backwater?"

Predictably, the guard was not over-pleased by this characterization, and he swung at her with a bellow. Although the other prisoners drew back with cries of alarm, the tall woman smoothly blocked his punch with her forearm, then, closing the distance between them, kneed him in a sensitive place. The guard doubled over, temporarily disabled, and the woman used his arm to drive him into an onrushing colleague. The men went down in a heap, and the prisoner stomped on their heads, decisively ending the fight. The other guards exchanged uncertain glances. Slaves weren't supposed to act this way.

The slave merchant, spying his remaining guards' understandable hesitation, flushed. "Have you lost your wits? Get her!" he ordered angrily, his voice little more than a hiss and his eyes nervously assessing the effect this *contretemps* was having on the potential buyers.

The guards obediently lurched into action, but they prudently chose to move more cautiously than had their predecessors. The woman watched their tentative approach with narrowed eyes, then as soon as they were a pace away, she exploded into action, meeting the first one with a heel strike to his head. He tumbled backwards, and she twisted the next one's arm, throwing him off the platform into the crowd. Another grabbed her from behind, and she instantly dropped to one knee, hurling him over her head.

She regained her feet just in time to be tackled by three more. They rose, grinning triumphantly and holding her between them. One had her feet, while the others each held one arm. The woman immediately slid one leg along the other, scraping off the guard's hands, and then kicked him in the chest. The other two were jerked to a halt by her feet thudding to the ground, and the woman began struggling to free her arms.

The crowd watched with mingled astonishment and amusement, and as the fight wore on, a member of the audience decided to chaff the seller. "Gee, I bet you'll have no trouble selling that one," he called out, his mouth twisted sardonically behind a black beard.

The slave merchant forced a smile. "Now, now, don't jest, sir. Anyone can see she's a lovely woman. Surely you can think of many uses for such a slave."

The man hooted derisively. "Go to bed with that one and you'll wake up dead."

"Are you saying you can't handle a mere woman?" the merchant inquired with feigned amazement, trying to ignore the guards' grunts of pain which were audible behind him. "You? One of the leading businessmen of the town?"

His target was not the least deterred, and hooking a thumb at the stage, replied, "Your guards can't, and they have weapons."

The merchant realized that he would make no sales until the matter was finished and, dropping all pretense nothing was amiss, he stalked back to the still-ongoing fray. The woman's arms were still held by two men, but by using her body weight to drive them into the other guards who are trying to help restrain her, she was able to frustrate their efforts very effectively.

The seller snatched up a fallen sword and, elbowing his minions aside, ended the struggle by digging the point of the sword under the woman's chin. She froze, a drop of blood trickling down the blade.

"What in Hades is wrong with you idiots? Hold her!"

"But you said not to damage the merchandise!" one guard protested.

The merchant shoved the sword at him with a muttered curse, then returned to the front of the stage, resuming his pleasant manner. "There, you see? All she needed was a slight adjustment in her attitude."

His heckler was unconvinced. "That's great. Do your guards come with her? How else are we supposed to protect ourselves?"

"Ha, ha. Very amusing, sir. But surely a man of your wits can devise ways to show her the error of her ways."

The townsman turned away dismissively. "Who needs that much aggravation?"

Others in the crowd moved to follow and the slave merchant called out desperately. "Wait! Wait a moment, sir. I see your point. After all, do I not have the reputation of selling the best, most well-trained slaves in all of Coveda? Tell you what I'll do: I'll take care of her temper for you."

The exodus paused as the first man turned back with a skeptical expression. "How?"

Caught, the merchant thought furiously. "Ah... Well, let's see... She can hardly fight with two broken arms."

"Can't do much work that way either. Besides, did you see her kick? Your men certainly felt it."

"Right you are! Okay, how about this—I'll break one arm and one leg for you. Surely that will cool her ire, and by the time she heals, well, you'll have broken her spirit by then, no doubt!"

"I don't know... The leg will probably heal crooked out of pure spite, and then a lot of her value will be gone."

The merchant's tone held increasing desperation. "Look, what about the lash? Nobody cares if a slave girl has a scarred back—you'll never see it. Just make me an offer. We can work something out."

For the first time, the woman spoke, yelling over the conversation. "The man who comes near me won't live out the night!"

"That's your idea of an adjusted attitude?" the heckler asked pointedly.

The merchant spun back to his prisoner, enraged at the loss of a sale and determined to end this. "That's it. At least you can serve as an example to the others. Hold her!"

He grabbed a whip from the guard, and the woman's attempts to wrest free of her captors halted abruptly as pressure was applied to the sword at her throat. The crowd watched, mildly interested and commenting upon the seller's style, while he shook out the whip and brought it down across her back.

By the third blow, the woman had stopped fighting, but she clenched her jaw, refusing to give anyone the satisfaction of hearing her cry out. The audience began to wager on how long she would last, but their gambling was interrupted when a large, booted foot stepped on the end of the whip as the seller swept it back for another blow.

When he encountered unexpected resistance when trying to bring his lash forward, the slave merchant turned to encounter Hercules, arms folded implacably.

"Excuse me," the man said with some annoyance, jerking meaningfully on the whip, "but if you haven't noticed, you're in the way."

"I did notice, and you're through," Hercules retorted, his implacable tone slightly marred by the fact that he was out of breath from hurrying to arrive as quickly as possible.

The merchant sighed impatiently. "Look, I don't want to be rude, but this is none of your concern. The slave has proven to be a lot more trouble than she's worth, and the least she can do to make up for the trouble she's caused is to provide the rest of us with a little entertainment."

Hercules didn't move. "The 'entertainment' is over."

"I don't know who you think you are, but—"

"They call me Hercules."

The merchant rolled his eyes. "Oh, Gods, not one of those. Boys, take care of this would-be hero."

Eager to redeem themselves, the guards obligingly rushed Hercules. He snatched up a nearby tent pole and used it to catch the approaching mob across their chests. Although they tried their utmost to push him off the platform, he overcame their resistance with minimal effort, and it was they who fell to the earth below. Hercules then turned back to the gaping slave merchant, alone on the platform except for Alteira and the guard who still held the sword to her throat.

Realizing his error, the merchant rushed forward to pump Hercules' hand. "You really are Hercules! What an honor this is! What can I do for you?"

Hercules extricated his hand with difficulty. "You can stop beating this woman."

The man grimaced apologetically. "I'd love to oblige, Hercules, but she's impossible. No one is crazy enough to buy her until the fire's knocked out of her, and—or did you mean you wanted her?"

Hercules recoiled with a look of revulsion. "I don't own slaves!"

This enlightened attitude failed to impress the slave merchant, who turned away with a dismissive sniff. "Yes, well, that's very trendy of you and all, but I have a business to run. Now, will you be purchasing someone or can I get on with my work? The soldiers will be happy to show you off."

He pointed to where a group of local militia had gathered, attracted by the ruckus. Hercules frowned down at them. Tossing a few goons off a platform was one thing, but taking on an entire city's military quite another. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, Hercules grudgingly nodded to the merchant. "All right, fine, I'll buy her."

The merchant beamed with delight. "What an excellent choice! A mere—er—five dinars!"

"Here's two."

He didn't hesitate. "Sold! She's all yours, mighty Hercules. Now kindly take your property off my stage."

Although the two men were satisfied with the denouement, they had forgotten to consult the object of their discussion. As soon as the guard removed his blade from her throat, the woman drove her elbow into his face, and spun on Hercules, blazing mad. "No one owns me! I'll—"

Her graphic threats were cut off when the slave merchant slammed the pommel of his whip against her skull. She dropped to the ground like a sack of meal.

He met Hercules' outraged glare with an innocent shrug. "Please, get acquainted on your own time. I have an auction to hold."

Realizing this is a battle he wouldn't win, Hercules gathered the woman onto his shoulder and set off.

Regretfully leaving Coveda and its inn, Hercules returned to the forest path by which he had come. He deposited his unexpected and still unconscious purchase at the edge of a small clearing, then set about preparing the campsite.

By the time he was finished, night had fallen. He was just lighting their fire when the woman began to stir. After a moment of restlessness, her eyes opened, and for a moment she looked around in confusion. Then her questing gaze fell upon Hercules, and her memory returned in a rush.

"You! I'll—"

She lurched upright, then yelped in pain as her back protested the sudden movement. Hercules approached with a reassuring smile, holding out a large leaf with goop on it.

"I gathered some gyatta berries. They make a good healing salve. If you want, I'd be happy to put it on your back."

She leaned away, suspicion on her features. "I bet you would. Don't you come near me."

Hercules was taken aback. "I'm only trying to help."

"Oh sure," she agreed derisively. "That's why you gave that maggot your money—to help me."

"It was!" Hercules protested, wounded.

His words fell upon deaf ears. She drew away with a snarl. "How stupid do you think I am? You bought yourself a slave girl, and you have every intention of—"

"I do not! Look, as far as I'm concerned, you're free. I would have given you your freedom back in the city, but the slave merchant knocked you out before I could."

"And I suppose you brought me to this deserted site so that you could show me the local wildflowers?" she sneered.

Hercules tried hard not to lose his temper. For this he had forsaken the feather beds of the Covedan inn? "I brought you here because I knew there were some gyatta berries nearby—I had passed them on my way into Coveda—and because I had a pretty good idea that if you came to while we were still in the town, you'd go after that slave merchant again."

"So I'm free."

"Yes."

"And you don't want anything."

"No."

He began to brighten, hopeful that she had at last recognized his benign intentions, but these hopes were quickly dashed as she snatched up a clod of dirt and hurled it at him. He ducked in the nick of time.

"You can't even lie well! Get away from me!"

Hercules threw up his hands in frustration, nearly losing the gyatta mush. "Why would I bother to lie? What possible reason would I have? You yourself pointed out we're in the middle of nowhere, and even if we weren't, the Covedans couldn't care less what I do to you."

There was a pause while she mulled over the truth to these words. "If you don't want anything, then why did you buy me?" she demanded, eyeing him narrowly.

"I'm beginning to wonder that myself," Hercules muttered under his breath.

"What?"

"I wanted to help you."

"Uh huh. I suppose you just wander the earth, helping people?"

"Well, actually, yes," Hercules admitted diffidently.

"And this pays well? Or do the gods drop ambrosia to you from heaven? Oh, that's right, I forgot. You're the son of Zeus. That must come in handy."

Hercules had grown progressively more nettled at her stubborn refusal to accept his words. "I don't see how my life is any concern of yours. Now do you want this on your back or not?"

"No. Wait, yes. All right. Just watch where you put your hands."

With many a suspicious look, she turned her back, allowing him to spread the goop over her wounds. Hercules tried to be gentle, but she couldn't suppress a wince every time he touched one of the weals. By the time he was finished, Hercules' moment of pique had passed, and he once again tried a friendly overture. "That was a brave thing you did, sticking up for that other prisoner," he offered.

The woman shrugged, then flinched at the resultant discomfort. "Not that it did her any good in the long run. I expect she's been sold by now."

"Even so, there aren't many people who would take on a group of armed guards for a stranger."

She sniffed haughtily. "Maybe not in this barbaric backwater, where you still worship she-demons like Hera, but where I come from, anyone would do as much for a dog." Then she remembered her companion's parentage and looked a bit sheepish. "I suppose I shouldn't have made that remark about your stepmother. ...Sorry."

To her surprise, Hercules smiled. "I have no quarrel with that description of Hera. I only wish more people recognized her true nature. So where is this land of yours? What made you leave it?"

The second he asked the question, he knew it was the wrong thing to say. His unwilling guest's expression darkened and the momentary thaw was over.

"That's my concern and none of yours! Just because you bought me doesn't entitle you to—"

"Okay, okay! Sorry I asked. Look, like I said before, you're free to go."

Her tone savage with rage and frustration, she hissed, "I can't go anywhere except with you. Despite the fact that I have pressing business elsewhere, I cannot leave your side."

Hercules blinked in confusion. "Why not? As far as I'm concerned, the purchase down in Coveda was nothing more than a charade."

She turned away. "Don't be stupid. You bought me, didn't you?"

"For two dinars! That's hardly enough to get upset over!" Hercules protested.

"My life may seem cheap to you, but it means a lot to me!"

"I didn't mean it like that. It's just—"

She interrupted his fumbling apology. "Besides, it has nothing to do with those stupid Covedans' laws. Among my people, if a person saves your life, you are—bonded—to him."

She was clearly less than delighted with this turn of events, and Hercules grew progressively more alarmed through the course of her explanation. "Wait a minute! Whatever your people may believe, I'm not interested in acquiring a—a wife, or—"

She favored him with a scornful look. "It's not that kind of a bond. It just means that I can't leave you. I owe you too great a debt."

Hercules tried to reason with his unwilling companion. "I don't collect debts. I helped you because I wanted to do it. I didn't expect anything in return."

"I don't care what you expected or what you want," she replied between clenched teeth. "I'm going to stay with you until I can find some way to repay you."

Hercules asked hopefully, "How about if I loan you two dinars and you—"

"It's not the money, you nitwit! You saved my life, and now I'm stuck with you!" she yelled.

"I'm sorry. I just— Wait a second. Why am I apologizing for rescuing you?" Hercules' temper finally flared to life. This was the thanks he received?

"Who asked you to get involved? I bet you do this a lot—sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong," the woman snarled back.

"If you'd rather be back in Coveda, the road is right over there." Hercules hooked a thumb over his shoulder.

"I already told you, I can't go there—or anywhere else, unless you're going. It would destroy the few shreds of honor that I have left." To their mutual horror, her chin began to tremble, and she turned away.

Hercules desperately tried to think of something to distract her. "You—um—you said something about having an urgent errand somewhere. Where? What is it?"

"What do you care? I can't go there now," she sniffled, not turning around.

"Maybe it's where I'm headed," Hercules suggested.

"Why would you go to Loradon?" she scoffed.

"What a coincidence! Loradon is just where I'm going!"

"It is not! ...Is it?"

Hercules smiled engagingly. "Well, it could be. We 'wandering heroes' don't have a set itinerary, and it sounds like something is amiss in Loradon."

She chewed her lip, torn. On the one hand, she was highly suspicious of Hercules' apparent good intentions; on the other, she was desperate to reach Loradon.

Finally, she concurred. "All right. You can go to Loradon."

"Gee, thanks," Hercules said ironically. "Can I also learn what's wrong there?"

"Later. Maybe."

"How about your name? Or it that being too personal?"

"You don't have to be snippy," she admonished. "It's Alteira. And you? They don't really call you Hercules, do they?"

"My mother does, and it's sort of caught on," he explained dryly.

Alteira rose to her feet and started for the road. "Well? What are you waiting for? Loradon isn't getting any closer. Let's go!"

Hercules sighed, extinguished the fire, and jogged after her. Why couldn't he ever learn to mind his own business?

By midday, they had reached a small village. The activity proclaimed it marketday, as the open field was lined with stalls and wandering vendors. Hercules moved steadily through the crowds, but something in one of the stalls caught Alteira's eye. She paused, moving for a closer look. Hercules, oblivious, continued on his way while Alteira entered the stall, drawn by hanging clothes.

Once inside, Alteira went immediately to the small but varied stock of women's clothing, and the shop's proprietor hurried over, eager to make a sale. It was then that he first caught sight of the slave collar still fastened around Alteira's neck. Instantly, his obsequious expression changed to one of disdain, but then he took a closer look.

The merchant ran his eyes over Alteira's form as she examined the clothing available. Liking what he saw, he stepped forward and took hold of her shoulder in a familiar manner. "Well, well. What brings you to my store?"

Alteira turned, the movement causing the merchant's arm to fall away. "How much for those clothes?" she asked, indicating several selections.

He looked skeptical. "You can pay?" Alteira hesitated, and the merchant moved closer with a cunning leer. " Or were you thinking of a different kind of deal?"

He again laid his hand upon her shoulder, this time giving it a suggestive squeeze and raising his eyebrows meaningfully.

Alteira brushed his hand away with weary disgust. "Just answer my question."

The man ignored her. "Since when does a slave have money? From the look of your back, your master can't be too happy with you. Could you be planning to run away? My silence—like my clothes—can be purchased... for a price." He replaced his hand and moved it down.

Meanwhile, Hercules was examining some of the fruit when yells of terror made him spin about. Automatically, he started toward the sound, intending to help.

The merchant, his nose bleeding, fled up the street and cannoned into Hercules, who reflexively caught him.

"Help! Help me!"

"Calm down" Hercules soothed. "What happened? Who did this to you?"

"She's crazy! She's going to kill me!"

"'She'"? With a sinking sensation, Hercules knew that the man wasn't referring to Hera. Then Alteira appeared, heading straight for the merchant, who dodged behind Hercules' reassuring bulk with a piercing shriek. Hercules rolled his eyes heavenward and blocked Alteira's path. "What's the problem?"

"None of your business! Stand aside!"

"Aaaah! Don't do it! Help me!" the merchant begged, clutching Hercules' shirt.

"Alteira, I'm not going to let you hurt him."

"You know her?" The man straightened in surprise.

"This isn't your affair!" Alteira snapped, trying to get at the merchant.

Hercules easily deflected her grasping hands. "It is so long as we're traveling together. Now, what—"

"So you are planning to order me around," Alteira exclaimed triumphantly. "I knew it!"

"I just asked you not to hurt him! Is that too much to ask?" Hercules retorted impatiently.

"Who are you to ask me anything?" she demanded with hauteur.

"Doesn't the fact that I bought you count for something?"

"Wait a minute. Are you her master? She belongs to you?" the clothing seller interrupted.

Hercules waved him to silence, distracted. "No. Yes. Sort of. I mean, I purchased her at a slave market, but—"

"I knew you were planning to keep me as a slave! So much for the myths about your sterling nature. I guess you're interested in helping others only when you can benefit from it. What's your plan? To sell me in Loradon? How much of a profit do you expect to make?"

Exasperated, Hercules explained, "I only meant that I did you a favor in Coveda—you admit that much yourself—and so I don't think it's too much to ask that you—"

The merchant tugged at Hercules' shoulder. "I have a complaint to make about your slave! She assaulted me! I want her punished!"

Alteira stared at Hercules challengingly. "Well?"

Hercules held up his hands, trying to sort things out calmly. "Wait a minute, wait a minute. What exactly happened?"

"She invaded my store—"

"I was shopping."

"With what? You've no money! When I asked her if she could pay, she attacked me!"

"I attacked you after you made disgusting remarks and refused to take your hands off me."

"You have no right—"

"I have no right? What about you—

The clothes seller turned to Hercules. "Can't you control your property?"

The question reignited Alteira's fury, and she lunged for the merchant. Hercules intercepted her in midair and held her back, feet dangling, while the man scrambled out of reach.

"I warn you, I'll have satisfaction," he threatened. "We have a law-abiding town here. We don't take this sort of nonsense from slaves. If you don't keep her in her place, I'll go to the town magistrate. It's a crime for a slave to strike a free man. Even if you won't punish her, the magistrate will. She'll be beaten—"

Hercules set Alteira back on her feet and turned to the merchant with a frown. "Just a minute. If any laws have been broken, it's my responsibility, so if anyone gets beaten, it'll be me."

"What? Why would you submit to these yokels?" Alteira demanded, shocked.

"Because we're guests in this town, and I'm not going to break the law. Besides, I'm sure the magistrate will be reasonable and accept an—"

"He's my brother," the local informed them smugly.

"I'm not going to let you play the hero like this. You're preachy enough already—you'll be insufferable after yet another act of martyrdom!" Alteira said furiously.

"You're welcome," Hercules riposted sardonically.

"Did you hear me? You are not claiming responsibility!" Alteira repeated, eyes narrowed.

"Hey, in case you hadn't noticed, I'm doing you a favor!"

"It's not a favor if I don't want you to do it. Have you always been this high-handed? I can understand it given your paternal heritage, but didn't your mother teach you any manners?"

Hercules ignored the question, and stated with finality. "This is my decision."

"Why? Because I'm your slave? Is that why what I want doesn't matter?"

"You are not my slave! I already told you, you're free!" Hercules yelled, his patience long since at an end.

"Then why don't you treat me like it?" Alteira challenged immediately. "Talk's cheap, but when it comes to actions, you're nothing but empty words."

Suddenly the merchant lost his smirk. "What? Hold on. I thought you said she was your slave."

"I said I'd purchased her, but I gave her her freedom immediately thereafter," Hercules explained briefly, his attention still on Alteira.

"So allow me to exercise my freedom. If you insist that we obey these mudeaters' laws—"

"I'm not insisting you obey anyone!"

"Except you."

"Look—"

"Wait, wait, wait." The merchant waved his hands to interrupt them. "If you aren't a slave, why are you wearing that collar?"

"What difference does it make?" Alteira said dismissively.

"Er, well..."

Hercules caught on. "Aha. It does make a difference—doesn't it? You said a slave can't strike a citizen. What about one free citizen striking another?"

The seller began to sweat. "Well, I, um, suppose that some of what I said could be construed as—er—offensive—to a, a free citizen. But when I saw that collar, I thought—"

"It's a fashion statement, you provincial clod," Alteira sniffed.

"But—but the marks on your back!"

"So I have 'exotic' tastes," Alteira shrugged.

The merchant wrinkled his nose. "Ick. Is that why you two were fighting over who would be beaten?"

Hercules hastily changed the subject. "I think it might be a good idea if we were to visit your brother and see what he thinks of your harassing visitors to the village."

"Don't be silly, Hercules. We'll just tell all his other potential customers about the reception I received. I'm sure that will produce much more gratifying results than a visit to the magistrate."

"You can't! My business would be ruined!" the merchant exclaimed, horrified.

"Oh dear."

The man made a sickly attempt at an ingratiating smile. "We're both rational, civilized people. Surely we can reach some mutually satisfactory resolution to this present difficulty."

"Suddenly she's rational and civilized?" Hercules demanded indignantly. "A minute ago you were treating her as though she were subhuman! Don't you see the illogic of slavery? It makes no sense that some arbitrary system decides that one person is better than another."

The merchant and Alteira regarded him steadily for a moment. Then: "He does go on, doesn't he?" the man asked Alteira.

"You've no idea," she replied feelingly. "So, what sort of deal did you have in mind?"

"I thought you were ready to kill him!" Hercules protested.

"At that time he wasn't offering me a new wardrobe, but he is now. Aren't you?"

The merchant swallowed hard. "With pleasure."

"Is that what this was all about? Getting new clothes?"

"No, but since you'll make a terrible fuss if I kill him, I might as well take what I can. Besides, how can I go to Loradon in these?" She gestured at her skimpy costume.

Hercules followed her gaze, confused. "Why? You look very—er—nice."

Alteira gave him a look of contempt. "Typical man. The Covedans forced me to wear this ridiculous outfit. They thought it would enhance my marketability. It seems that it worked, but it's uncomfortable and completely unsuited to long hikes. So—after you, merchant. Let me see what you have."

Within an hour, the pair was once again on the road, Alteira now attired in clothing much more appropriate for walking and fighting. She remained standoffish, but was no longer quite as hostile as she had been. Hercules, ever optimistic, continued to try to make friends. "I meant to tell you—you fought incredibly well yesterday. Where did you learn combat skills like that?"

"My people teach all children the skills they need to defend themselves. It's only barbarians who deny vital knowledge to half their population."

"So everyone in your land can fight that well?"

"Well, some of us have had further training," Alteira admitted grudgingly. "In my country, I held a position of some importance. I was a Guardian."

"What did you guard?"

Alteira studied him, debating whether to explain. Before she could speak, however, a little girl appeared on the road ahead of them and shouted peremptorily. "Hercules!"

They halted, amazed both at her sudden appearance and her ready knowledge of Hercules' identity. Hercules knelt down, half-charmed by her sweet appearance, but ever-wary of one of Hera's tricks. "Hello there. How do you know my name?"

She gazed up at him with guileless blue eyes. "They all said you were coming."

"Who said?"

The little girl pointed vaguely behind her. "Them."

"The townspeople?" Alteira guessed.

"How would they know my identity? I didn't tell anyone."

Alteira cleared her throat and looked away, and Hercules glanced sharply at her. "Did you mention my name?"

"How was I to know you had a fetish for privacy?" Alteira replied defensively. "I may have mentioned it to a few of the women in the store."

Hercules groaned at the news. "Now there'll be no peace. I only just got rid of the fifty daughters of—"

Irritated at this apparent male conceit, Alteira snapped, "Don't flatter yourself! Just because you're slightly famous doesn't mean people chase after you."

In reply, Hercules just looked pointedly at the little girl. Trumped, Alteira turned away grumpily.

Hercules turned back to the child with a gentle question. "What's your name?"

"Gayla. Come with me."

She took his hand commandingly and started to pull him away, but Hercules resisted, still not certain this isn't a trap. "Whoa—not so fast. Where are your parents? Why are you out here by yourself?"

"They're at home. I came here looking for you." Gayla tugged at his hand impatiently, bored with all the questions.

"Why?"

She stared up at him as though he were quite dim. "Because I need your help!"

"You do? What's the matter?"

"It's Cestus. He's up in a tree."

Hercules began to become concerned. "Who's Cestus? Is that your brother? Is he in trouble? Did someone chase him into the tree?"

"Yes, and now he can't get down. It was that bad Brutus. He scared Cestus and made him climb really, really high. Now Cestus can't get down. I want you to pick up the tree and get Cestus down and then I want you to go and put Brutus in the tree, and see how he likes it."

Hercules grinned. "Well, at least I can get Cestus down for you. How old is he?"

"Two."

Hercules' eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Two? How did a two year old get into a tree?"

"He just ran up it."

Alteira had begun to entertain a sneaking suspicion. "Gayla, Cestus isn't your brother. Is he?"

"Of course not! He's my cat!" Gayla agreed scornfully.

Alteira's initial impulse was to throw herself upon the ground and roll around in wild hilarity, especially when she saw Hercules' expression, but she managed to keep her voice under control long enough to say, "Gee, Hercules, are you sure you can handle this all by yourself?"

He favored her with a long-suffering look as he allowed Gayla to drag him away. Alteira called after him. "Don't worry, Hercules. By day's end, the story will have you fighting a den of lions, not rescuing a housecat. I bet this is how most of the myths about you got started!"

Hercules disappeared over the hill, and Alteira made herself comfortable on the hillside, awaiting his return. There were plenty of fruit trees nearby, and Alteira had just started her second apple when the sound of running feet made her sit up. Within seconds, a young couple was visible on the road, dashing towards her as fast as they could. They reached her, gasping for breath, and pleaded, "Help! Where is your house?"

"I don't live around here. I'm just passing through," Alteira answered blankly.

"Are you traveling with a caravan? Where are the others?" the girl begged.

"There are no others. Just me. What is it?"

"Bandits!" the boy cried. "They ambushed us up the road, but we were able to break free and run away. They're right behind us! We have to flee!"

"Too late." The mocking voice from behind made them all turn around. Four thugs had jogged up and were fanning out.

Alteira stepped forward. "I don't have any money, and it looks as though you've already taken these people's, so why don't you just move on?"

"Because nobody escapes from us. It would ruin our reputation if word got out," another thug explained.

"I think I can promise you that none of us will say anything. Okay? Do we have a deal?"

The brigands pretended to think about it for a moment. "Mmmm... No. Get 'em."

The thugs rushed them. Two went for the boy, thinking he posed the greatest danger. The teenager was quickly subdued and dropped to the ground, half-conscious. Meanwhile, another grabbed the girl, kicking and struggling, and the last one tried to do the same to Alteira.

She neatly deflected his grasping hand and turned it back on him in a joint lock. She then used the hold to throw him into the nearby fruit tree. He collided with it headfirst, knocking loose several apples, and collapsed to the ground with a moan.

Alteira then directed her attention to the men who were rifling the pockets of the boy. She dropped the first one with a strike to the back of the neck, then dove at the other one while he struggled to draw his knife. She was grappling with him and winning the battle when the remaining brigand yelled for attention.

"Surrender or she's dead!" His dagger dug viciously into the girl's neck, and Alteira was forced to halt.

She released the last thug, who whipped out his own knife and advanced on her as she backed off. Behind her, the other two bandits regained their feet, and Alteira was quickly ringed by hostile faces. She glanced from man to man, trying to decide what options she had, as the thugs advanced.

They were only a handsbreadth away when a new voice interrupted. "Excuse me! What seems to be the problem?"

Everyone spun to find Hercules standing a few yards off, a spotted cat in his arms and Gayla by his side. The bandits instantly assessed him to be a passing farmer, and their leader snarled, "This is none of your affair, Dad! Get on home with your kid before you end up hurt."

"Or dead," another added with a growl.

Hercules handed Cestus to Gayla and stepped closer. "You're the ones who'll end up hurt if you persist. Why don't we just end this now?"

The last thug decided to join in, and he brandished his knife threateningly. "You heard them! Get out of here!"

The instant the knife moved from her throat, the girl grabbed it with both of her hands and, lowering her head, bit the bandit's wrist. He let go of the knife with a bellow just as her boyfriend, who'd been feigning unconsciousness waiting for just such an opportunity, rolled into him from behind. The man's knees buckled and he fell over backwards. Both teenagers jumped on top of him and began pounding him.

Alteira used the diversion to close with the thug nearest her. He was too distracted to use his knife before she was upon him, and after grabbing his knife hand and immobilizing his wrist, she threw him to the ground with a quick twist of her hips. She followed him down, and socked him in the jaw before he recovered. She then went to help the kids subdue their foe.

By this point, the remaining two bandits were badly rattled and beginning to consider the value of a strategic withdrawal. Seeing their pals set upon, they not unreasonably chose to exit in a different direction—the path blocked by Hercules.

"Get out of the way!" the first bandit demanded, his knife extended menacingly.

Hercules leaned forward, one hand cupping his ear. "Excuse me? What was that?"

"Get out of the way!"

Hercules shook his head sorrowfully after a glance at Gayla. "Somebody forgot the magic word."

Driven beyond endurance by this "farmer's" flippant remarks, the thug charged. He attacked with a backhanded slash, which Hercules arrested mid-swing and then countered with a left cross which dropped his adversary to the ground.

The second brigand stepped forward. He was not the brightest of the bunch, but he was undeniably the biggest, and he advanced on Hercules with a certain swagger. "You think you're so tough—"

"At least I think."

Gayla got it before the thug and started to giggle. Hercules turned back to her and winked. She waved cheerfully in return.

The bandit belatedly realized he'd been insulted, and he heaved a mighty punch at the side of Hercules' head. Hercules caught it without looking away from Gayla. He made a funny face, sending her into screams of delight, while the last bandit struggled madly to pull his hand free.

Hercules twisted the man's wrist, and the brigand, finally realizing he was outclassed, snatched at his dagger in order to even the odds.

Alteira shouted a warning from where she was standing over her foe's prone form. "Hercules! He's going for his knife!"

Hercules shoved the thug's wrist down, then snapped his elbow into the man's face. He staggered backwards, and Hercules finished him off with a particularly impressive spinning kick to the abdomen. Gayla put Cestus down and applauded.

"Oh for the gods' sake, Hercules," Alteira groaned, walking over. "Do you have to train your audience when they're this young?"

Hercules was unperturbed. "Do I detect a note of envy?"

"Only nausea."

The boy and girl timidly approached. "Excuse me—did you say you were Hercules?" asked the young woman.

"Thank you! Thank you so much! If it hadn't been for you, those men would have—" her boyfriend began.

"I was there too, you know," Alteira reminded them indignantly.

They completely ignored her. The girl stood on tiptoes to kiss Hercules, and the boy pumped his hand, babbling thanks. Although normally Hercules would find this effusive gratitude embarrassing, he took a certain degree of malicious pleasure in seeing how much it annoyed Alteira.

Before too long, Gayla tired, and she gathered Cestus back in her arms. Marching up to Hercules, she yanked on the hem of his jacket. "I want to go home."

"Do you think you two can manage to tie up these bandits and get help from the nearest village, or do you need Hercules and me to do everything for you?" Alteira snapped.

"Oh, we can do it, Hercules. We wouldn't want to trouble you further. Thank you!"

Hercules picked Gayla up. "You're very welcome. I'm glad I came along when I did."

As they walked along, Hercules with Gayla in his arms—and Cestus in hers—Alteira said, "I hope that despite those two mush-brains' comments, you have a realistic memory of that fight."

Hercules pretended to ponder the question. "I think so. When I walked up, you were about to be jumped by three of them and—"

"No! I mean, yes, but that's not what I—"

"Did you see Hercules hit that nasty man?" Gayla asked Alteira.

Alteira sighed heavily. "Yes."

"If you'd take off that slave collar, maybe you wouldn't seem so invisible," Hercules commented.

"It stays on until I fulfill my obligation of service to you!" she flared.

Gayla beamed at Hercules proudly. "Even Brutus wouldn't chase Cestus if you were around, Hercules!"

"Gayla, did you see me fighting those men? Just like Hercules?" Alteira asked hopefully.

"No." At Alteira's disappointed expression, she offered, "Maybe Cestus did, though! Cestus, did you watch the lady?"

Alteira pinched the bridge of her nose. Pity from a five-year-old was a little hard to take.

Hercules tried to stifle his chuckles and decided a change of subject would be politic. "Where do you live, Gayla? Is it much further?"

She pointed. "No. It's just there."

In the distance, Hercules and Alteira could see a neatly kept farmhouse, with livestock in well-maintained corrals. A man led a horse from the barn. Several children of various ages ran back and forth as a tall woman in the front yard called out instructions. "You two go check the lake again, and the rest of you split up along the road. She can't have gotten far on foot. Beron, see if you can find him at the—"

"It can't be," Hercules muttered incredulously. He walked faster, forcing Alteira to jog to catch up. "I don't believe it. Seryna! Beron! It's me!"

The bustle came to a halt as everyone turned to see who was shouting. Then, with gasps of surprise and delight, the two adults dropped everything and ran to meet Hercules. The woman enfolded Hercules and Gayla in a hug. "Hercules! And Gayla, you little imp! Where were you? We were worried sick!"

The man lifted Gayla from Hercules' arms. "How did you know where to come, Hercules? The gods must have guided your footsteps."

Hercules grinned. "If that had been the case, I'd likely have gone over the nearest cliff. No, it was Gayla who brought me, but I had no idea she was yours. And what are you doing here? The last time I visited, you were living three valleys over."

"That was seven years and four children ago. When this farm became available, we bought it and moved," came the smiling reply.

"If you visited more often, you'd learn these things." The woman poked Hercules. "But, Hercules, if you didn't know we were here, how did you find Gayla for us? We've been searching for you ever since we heard in town that you were passing through the area, but then Gayla went missing, and I had to send the children to look for her."

"I wish I could claim credit, but it's more the case that she found me."

"Gayla? What were you doing? You know you're not supposed to wander away like that," her father chided.

Gayla shrugged, matter-of-fact. "Brutus chased Cestus up a tree, and nobody would help me get him down. You're always telling stories about how Hercules helps people, and I heard you send the others out to find him, so I went to find him so that he could help me."

"You are a very naughty girl," her mother admonished, laughing and scolding at the same time. "Hercules can't be bothered with silly pussycats."

"Oh, yes he can," Gayla retorted smugly, not in the least chastened.

Hercules laughed with the others and reclaimed Gayla. "I'm sorry, Seryna, but I always was a soft touch for those eyes of yours."

"I can see the children are going to have fun with you. You will stay for a while, won't you? The night, at least."

Hercules glanced over his shoulder at Alteira. "I'm sorry—we're on our way to Loradon. But I suppose one night couldn't hurt?"

For the first time, Seryna noticed Alteira. "Hercules! How rude of us. I'm so sorry, my dear. The surprise of seeing Hercules and the safe return of our daughter blinded us to everything else. Please excuse our rudeness. Welcome to our home. I am Seryna, and this is my husband, Beron. As you have surely gathered, we are old friends of Hercules."

"How do you do. My name is Alteira. I'm a new—acquaintance—of Hercules."

"The collar is a new fashion," Hercules offered quickly.

"Really, Hercules, did you imagine we would think you had taken to owning slaves?" Seryna laughed.

"The idea!" Beron agreed, chuckling.

Hercules exchanged a glance with Alteira, who shrugged and said nothing.

"Alteira, you will spend the night here? It would mean a great deal to us," Seryna asked, taking the younger woman's hand.

Alteira surrendered gracefully. "Thank you for the hospitality."

That night, Beron and Seryna sat in front of the fire with Alteira. Beron smoked his pipe while his wife sewed and Alteira stared moodily into the flames. The peaceful tableau was marred only by screams of glee and thunderous crashes in the background.

After one particularly horrifying noise, Seryna looked up tranquilly. "Give them a roar, would you, dear?"

Beron obligingly removed his pipe and let loose a menacing shout. "What's going on in there?"

There was a moment of dead silence, then seven children and Hercules chorused, "Nothing."

"What was that awful crash?"

"Just Hercules," one of Beron's offspring said innocently.

"And that sickening thud?"

"Just Hercules," another piped up reassuringly.

"It's getting late," Seryna called. "You'd better go to bed or there will be nothing left of Hercules."

A storm of protest broke, but Beron and Seryna sat peacefully and in a few seconds, Hercules appeared in the doorway, children tucked under each arm and hanging from his neck. He looked like a laden fruit tree.

"Can I tell them a bedtime story?" he asked, panting.

"Only if they all promise to go straight to sleep the instant the story's over," Beron answered, waggling his pipe sternly at the children.

"We promise! We promise!" they all vowed.

Hercules carried the children off to the bedroom and quiet descended. Alteira lifted her eyes from the flickering fire and glanced over at her hosts. "You seem to know Hercules well. What's he like?"

Surprised, Seryna glanced up from her sewing. "But you're traveling together. Do you mean to say you hadn't met before?"

"No. I've heard the myths, of course, but you can't believe what they say. All that nonsense about his vow to help others. The stories about his risking his life for total strangers... I mean, there's probably a kernel of truth to some of them, but—"

Beron and Seryna exchanged a glance. "I'm afraid the Hercules we know is every bit as honorable as the myths make out," Seryna smiled apologetically.

"It was Hercules who helped make this area fertile again after Hera's priests diverted our river," Beron continued. "They wanted this region to grow Hera's sacred grain, and they burned entire homesteads to try to get us to turn the land over to them. Hercules drove them out."

"I can understand why you'd be grateful, but after all, everyone knows that Hercules and his stepmother don't get along. I'm sure he'd help anyone in order to thwart her plans," Alteira argued.

"Perhaps, but if he were just in it for revenge, then why would he remain after the priests were driven away? Why stay on for all the hard months of rebuilding waterways and irrigating fields?"

Alteira shook her head stubbornly. "Maybe he stayed on because he liked being surrounded by grateful people. It must be very comfortable in a place where everyone thinks you're wonderful."

Seryna nodded. "I know what you're thinking, and it's hard to believe that anyone who's so famous and sought-after could be anything but shallow and vain. But Hercules is one of the most humble people I know. He truly wishes to use his power for good. And he's one of the loneliest men I've ever met."

"Lonely?" Alteira echoed, incredulous. "Hercules? Women constantly throw themselves at him. Men are forever trying to shake his hand."

Seryna gazed at her steadily. "Surely you know that he lost his family. And if that pain weren't enough, how would you like to be in his shoes? Never knowing if someone likes him for himself or because of who he is.

Always wary lest an offer of friendship be a trap of Hera's—or worse, facing the possibility of making a friend whom she could hurt. Why do you think he wanders the earth the way he does? You see him with our children. You see how much joy they give him. Don't you think he would settle down again if he dared?"

Beron nodded. "Hercules never knows if someone is being sincere with him or if they just want a favor. That's why he helps strangers—he sees a need and jumps in, rather than waiting for one side or the other to approach him. That way he never gets caught up in someone else's agenda. He makes up his own mind and does what he believes is right—no matter what the cost to himself."

Seryna lay her hand on Alteira's. "I don't know what brought the two of you together, but you will never find a more true and steadfast friend than Hercules."

Alteira bit her lip in indecision. "I wish I could believe that."

At that moment, Hercules appeared in the doorway, flushed but beaming. "They're fast asleep. I knew my stories would knock them out. They work better than any sleeping draught."

Alteira rose. "Excuse me. I know you have a great deal to speak about, and I want to catch up on my sleep. Good night."

She left the room, and Hercules claimed her chair. "I can't believe it's been seven years! Tell me everything."

Beron nodded after Alteira. "Is there anything you'd like to tell us?"

Hercules sighed resignedly. "There isn't much to tell. I did her a favor—which she resented—and now I can't get rid of her. Believe me, I've had more pleasant traveling companions. Sometimes this hero business isn't much fun."

Seryna clucked her tongue in mild reproof. "Have you changed so much that you now expect gratitude? Unrequested help is often unwelcome."

"I don't mind if my efforts go unthanked," Hercules protested, "but to be stuck with a companion who thinks you're slightly lower than the dust underfoot—and who offers this opinion every chance she gets—is something else."

Beron meditatively puffed on his pipe. "Any chance that you're resenting her comments because some of them are accurate?"

Stung, Hercules replied, "I'm not that self-centered. And in all honesty, no one could be as arrogant as she thinks I am. According to her, I'm worse than Narcissus!"

Seryna shuddered. "That self-absorbed prig. Don't be silly, Hercules. Beron wasn't suggesting that Alteira was right about that aspect, but what about some of the other things she says? About your interfering in other people's lives, regardless of their wishes? Or rushing in to take over when someone else might already have matters well in hand?"

Hercules shifted uneasily. "I don't do that. Do I?"

Beron leaned forward. "Hercules, we haven't seen you in seven years. The man we knew was guilty of nothing more than a large heart, great compassion, and unmatched courage. But if Alteira's words bother you this much, maybe it's because you agree with some of what she says."

"Or it may just be that she's extremely annoying," Seryna ended briskly. "Enough of this serious talk, Hercules. Tell us of your adventures."

Hercules grinned. "Only if you promise not to fall asleep like the children did."

The next morning, after bidding farewell to Seryna and Beron's family, Hercules and Alteira were once again on the road for Loradon.

"I appreciate your agreeing to stop for the night. We could have traveled farther yesterday."

Embarrassed, Alteira brushed off the thanks. "That's all right. I was tired anyway."

"It's been a while since I stayed with a family. I forgot how much fun it can be," Hercules mused, as much to himself as to his companion.

Alteira smiled despite herself. "They were very kind. It reminded me of my home."

Hercules eyed her cautiously. "If I ask you about your land again, will you be offended?"

Alteira shook her head, her talk with Seryna and Beron still fresh in her mind. "No. I—I apologize. I shouldn't have been so mistrustful of you. I'm from Karona; it's a small city in the Shadowed Mountains."

"I've never been there. What is it like?" Hercules asked curiously.

Her eyes grew dreamy. "Like nowhere else in the world. It is a peaceful place, with hot springs, subterranean caverns, and winters so cold the air itself seems to freeze. The sunsets are brilliant—as though Zeus painted them just for us—and the sunrise is even better."

"It sounds wonderful," Hercules commented softly, his eyes on her face. "What made you leave?"

Alteira sighed, her expression growing sad. "I told you I was a Guardian, but I didn't tell you what that means. For centuries, one of my people's most prized possessions has been the Eye of Apollo. It's a gemstone, as large as your fist, that legend says comes from Apollo's staff. It's supposed to have healing powers when wielded by an immortal, but for us, it has become a symbol of harmony. So long as it is among us, we are well."

"It wards off plague?"

That earned him a look. "'Well' in a philosophical sense. We've outgrown the outmoded rituals of begging the gods for favors. They never listen anyway."

Hercules' jaw dropped in delight. "I've got to visit your land—your people sound wonderful."

Flattered, Alteira replied. "Thank you; I think we are. Anyway, I was one of the people chosen to guard the Eye. It was an honor to be selected. I was very proud. Then..."

"Something happened?"

"Someone happened," Alteira said bitterly. "A traveler arrived. He was charming. I was stupid. He—he led me to believe he cared for me. I trusted him. When he arrived at the shrine one night, while I was on duty, I thought his ardor had brought him. I was wrong; it was his greed. I drank the mulled wine he offered. It was drugged, and when I woke up the next morning, he was gone, along with the Eye."

Hercules grimaced sympathetically. "What happened then?"

"Everyone was very understanding, which made it worse. I left, swearing I wouldn't return without the Eye. I've been searching for that swine Ethrone ever since. I lost him in the swamps of Kitimirr, but I picked up his trail on the far side of the Obsidian Sea. I thought I would make up some time by cutting across Coveda, but I had a little problem with the border guards, and—"

He nodded. "— and ended up as a slave. So you think this Ethrone is headed for Loradon?"

"It's the only place on this side of the Great Desert that is rich enough to buy the Eye."

"I suppose it has occurred to you that the Loradonians might not be willing to part with the eye—even if it was stolen merchandise."

Alteira flushed. "I don't care if they're willing or not! The Eye belongs to my people! I'll make them return it."

Hercules eyed her angry face, more than a little concerned by her implacable tone. "Maybe it's just as well that I'm going along with you. You might need my help before this is over."

Once again, Alteira's pride was injured. "Oh? You think I can't handle this myself? Let me tell you something, just because I don't have some showy talent compliments of an illicit liaison, don't assume I'm unable to take care of my own affairs. Besides, so what if you're strong? Strength alone can only get you so far."

More amused than offended, Hercules asked, "You think you're better suited to handle trouble than I am?"

She mistook his amusement for irritation and said placatingly, "Don't be offended—I'm bound to you, remember? I'm on your side, no matter what. But those of us who haven't had a magical talent to lean on are naturally a little more prepared to deal with hard knocks than you are. You may have had a charmed life, but some of us got where we are the hard way."

Hercules was too amazed to know whether to laugh or take offense. "I didn't—"

"Look, we're nearly at Traveler's Rest. When we arrive, don't worry. Sometimes the crowd there can be rough, but I'll be there for you."

"I really don't—"

"Don't worry about thanking me. I still owe you."

Hercules decided it was better not to correct Alteira's misconception, and upon their arrival at Traveler's Rest, he followed her meekly into a small tavern. A small crowd was at the bar, and several of the room's tables were taken. The noise level was high, and no one paid much attention to the newcomers.

"Get us a table. I'll order the meal," Alteira told him, heading for the bar.

Hercules stared after her, less than thrilled with her peremptory tone, then he shrugged and seated himself at the nearest table. It could have been worse; at least she was talking to him.

As he leaned back in his chair, resting, he overheard the conversation at the next table and realized the patrons there were ogling Alteira as she spoke to the bartender.

"Wonder how much it'd cost for a night with that."

"More than you've got. Or do you think she'd give you a discount for your good looks?"

"A discount? More likely she'd double her rates!" a third commented with a raucous guffaw.

Sensing that there could be trouble if these men continued their speculation after Alteira arrived at the table, Hercules bent forward to address them. "Excuse me, but that's my companion that you're talking about, and I'd appreciate it if you'd lower your voices before she comes over here."

They gave him unfriendly looks. "Why? You the one we need to be paying?"

"You misunderstand. She's not for sale."

They eyed him insolently, clearly unimpressed. "Yeah? Says who?" one demanded, hefting his club. Behind him, the other two got out of their chairs, looming over Hercules threateningly. Hercules rose, and there was a moment of mutual sizing-up, interrupted by Alteira, who pushed her way between them.

"What's going on here? Are you bothering him?" she demanded of the barflies.

Hercules tried unsuccessfully to move her aside. "Alteira—"

She ignored his efforts and continued to address the other men. "Listen, if you want to take him on, you'll have to come through me. So if you're smart, you'll go back to your table and finish your drinks."

The others stared at her, then at each other, and then at Hercules, who was looking extremely harassed and uncomfortable by then. Finally one spoke, trying to get it all straight. "You're protecting him?"

"You have a problem with that? I don't know what you were thinking, but it's not fair to pick on him just because of who he is," she scolded.

"Alteira!" Hercules could cheerfully have strangled her.

" 'Who he is'? Who is he?" one demanded, bewildered.

"Don't you know? That's Hercules."

Hercules, now thoroughly embarrassed, grabbed her by the arm and dragged her aside. The entire bar was now watching and whispering. "Alteira! That's not a bright thing to say!"

She shrugged him off. "Why not? Being the son of Zeus should be good for at least a round of free drinks. Well?" She looked expectantly at the three men, and they, completely befuddled, shuffled their feet and nodded in bewilderment.

"Um, sure. Why not?"

Once they realized that the confrontation wasn't going to degenerate into a brawl, the other patrons of the bar came forward shyly, eager to meet a living legend. To Hercules' intense discomfort, everyone wanted to shake his hand, and he was forced to perform parlor tricks for most of the night. Alteira, meanwhile, relaxed in the background.

Late that night, as they finally made their way through the streets to the inn, Hercules remained aggrieved. "Thanks to you, I had to pick up every person in there at least twice, not to mention the bar itself and every other stick of furniture!"

Alteira giggled, a little tipsy thanks to all the free drinks. "Yes, but we didn't have to pay for dinner, did we? At least your father's name is good for something."

"This is not how I want to use my strength! It is not meant to be used to cadge drinks! Besides, I thought we were just stopping for a quick lunch. What happened to heading for Loradon as fast as we can?"

Alteira yawned. "Don't be so grumpy. Didn't you see those kids' faces? They were tickled to death to meet you."

Hercules' countenance softened for a moment. "All right, that part I didn't mind. But the rest! You have no idea how stupid it is to go into a tavern and announce that you're the son of a god!"

Alteira breezily waved his objections away. "What are you talking about? Everything went fine."

Hercules pulled her to a halt, looking down the road. "I don't think so."

She stopped and followed his gaze. The three denizens of the bar, along with two other friends, were spread out across the street ahead, blocking their progress. All were armed. "So, Hercules, you think you can just come into town and impress everyone with how great you are?" one yelled belligerently.

"Yeah! You're not so tough!"

Hercules glared at Alteira. "Now do you believe me? Some people just can't pass up a challenge, even one that doesn't exist." He turned to the men and spoke firmly. "I'm not looking for trouble. All I want is a night's lodging in your inn, and I'll be on my way."

"We don't care what you want!"

The others yelled noisy agreement, and Hercules saw there was no way out but a fight. He set his jaw and dusted off his hands. "Stay out of the way," he told Alteira over his shoulder. "This shouldn't take long."

"Excuse me? What do you think you're doing?" Alteira demanded incredulously.

Impatient, Hercules snapped, "What does it look like? Now get out of the way before you get hurt!"

"You're not fighting anyone! I already told you, I'm honor-bound to protect you! Now, you step aside and let me handle this."

"Have you lost your mind? There are five of them!"

Alteira squawked indignantly. "You think I can't handle five drunken troublemakers from a town in the middle of nowhere? Those bandits the other day had a hostage, but these nitwits are easy prey."

Hercules took a deep breath and tried to be patient. "I'm not downplaying your abilities, but there are five of them, and—"

"And I'm only a feeble woman? Oh, but you're pretty certain of your ability to defeat all of them, aren't you?"

"We don't have time to argue about this. But if we did, I'd point out that it was you who got us into this mess!"

"So now I'm not only feeble, but indiscreet as well! Well, I've got news for you, Son of Zeus, I can handle this crowd blindfolded and with one foot in a bucket!"

By then, the drunks were growing restless, the hissed argument between their intended victims confusing them. "Hey! Hey, Hercules! Are you coming, or do we have to drag you over?"

Alteira shoved past Hercules. "Listen, you big goon, we're having a discussion here, and you're just going to have to wait a minute!"

Hercules yanked her back. "Would you stop antagonizing them! You're only making it worse, and I'm the one who has to deal with the problem!"

His words only served to inflame her further. "You honestly don't believe I can handle them? Well, watch this!" She jerked free and planted herself in front of the drunks, arms akimbo. "What, there are only five of you? Don't you have any more friends?"

They looked at each other. "Huh? Well, yeah, but—"

"Good. Go get them. We'll wait here. Bring at least two—no, make it three. Hercules! How many do you think you could take on?"

"Would you shut up! What do you want? To fight a dozen?"

"Are you suggesting that you could but I couldn't?" she demanded, turning back to confront the men one more time. "Well? Do you have another seven friends?"

The drunks began to realize that they were in trouble. Exchanging alarmed glances, they backed away, muttering of insanity and "touched by the gods".

"Hey!" Alteira yelled after them. "Where are you going? Get back here!"

Hercules finally succeeded in dragging her into the doorway of the inn, just as the last drunk fled down the street. "I can't believe your people let you out on your own. You need a keeper," Hercules snapped, hauling her inside.

Now that the excitement had passed, the wine she had consumed started to take effect, and Alteira patted Hercules' shoulder drowsily. "You're so timid. I wouldn't have let them hurt you. And b'sides, you didn't have to fight anyone, now did you? I told you I'd take care of you."

She pushed past him into the inn, and he followed with a defeated shake of his head. How did he get into these things?

The next morning, Alteira was not so sanguine. Hercules strode briskly along, enjoying the fine morning sunshine, while Alteira staggered behind him, desperately shading her eyes from the light. Hercules glanced back, a wicked gleam coming into his eye.

"What's the matter, Alteira?" he asked sweetly. "Is your back hurting? Would you like to stop and eat something? It might make you feel better."

She favored him with a nasty, albeit weak, glare. "Very funny. I think that ale they gave us yesterday was drugged."

"You mean the ale they gave you. I was too busy lifting things to drink any. Besides, you get what your money buys, and those ales were free."

"All right, all right. Would you just stop talking so loudly?"

"I should have realized you were so soused when you tried to take on that crowd."

Alteira looked at him sharply. "Are we back to that again? Why are you so comfortable with the idea that you—and only you—can hold your own against several assailants? You're so typical!"

"Typical of what?" Hercules inquired. He was beginning to enjoy needling her. "'Self-proclaimed heroes'? Sons of Zeus?"

"Men! You're all arrogant, dismissive, untrustworthy—"

Hercules lost his grin. "Hey, wait a minute. Just because Ethrone was a—"

"Pig."

"— doesn't mean the rest of us are. I'm sorry that he betrayed you, but—"

"Don't feel sorry for me! I've learned my lesson, and the gods will walk the earth before I trust another one of you again!"

"All I'm saying is that—" Hercules tried.

Alteira stopped and sniffed the air. "What is that awful stink?"

Hercules followed her lead, then pointed to the smoke from a nearby cottage. "Mmmmm. Smells like someone's cooking lunch. Maybe they'd be willing to share—let's go see. I'm starved."

Alteira reluctantly followed him as he headed for the house. "That's another thing about you men. You're always hungry!"

Hercules walked towards the small house, Alteira lagging several yards behind him. He drew breath to call out to the people inside, but before he could, a small boy cannoned into his legs from behind a tree, yelling. "Daddy! Daddy!"

Hercules froze for a moment, remembering things past, then very gently bent down and pulled the boy loose. "Hi there. Who are you?" he asked softly.

The little boy looked at him, his face clouded with confusion. A woman rushed from the house, her face flushed. "Stamor! Sta— Oh."

The little boy stared gravely at his mother. "It's not Daddy."

She drew him to her side and looked up at Hercules, flustered. "I'm sorry. He thought you were my husband. You're about the same size and Pyrro must have—"

Hercules smiled down at the child. "No need to apologize. I'm flattered. Is your husband due back from a journey?"

The woman's face fell. "I'm beginning to fear he won't ever return."

"Typical man," Alteira muttered, sotto voce, from behind Hercules.

He ignored her. "Has he been gone long?"

The woman's lips trembled. "Almost two days. He went with a party of men from the village. Isn't that where you're from?"

"Not exactly. We're travelers and smelled your cooking. We hoped we might—"

"But if it's too much trouble—" Alteira offered quickly, her stomach still unsettled.

"No, of course not," the woman said, forcing a smile. "You're very welcome. Please come in."

Hercules stood his ground. "Thank you, but I don't understand why you're so worried about your husband. If he's only been gone two days—"

"He wasn't on a trip to market. The men were trying to kill the monster that's been preying upon the shepherds in the hills."

Hercules' ears pricked up at the mention of "monster". "When did they expect to be back?"

The woman tried hard not to lose her composure, but she could not hide her fear. "By nightfall. Two days ago."

"Hmm. Maybe I'd better visit the hills," Hercules mused.

She stared at him. "But why should you risk your life? This isn't your problem!"

"He does this all the time," Alteira said resignedly. "Believe me."

"But what can you hope to accomplish alone?" she demanded of Hercules.

Alteira glared at her. "Ahem."

That got her an apologetic glance, but the woman quickly returned her gaze to Hercules. "Excuse me. But there are only two of you. The men of the village numbered eight! And they haven't been heard from since. Why, I don't even know your name."

Alteira opened her mouth to answer, but then thought better of it. Hercules smothered a smile, then replied. "I'm Hercules," he confessed, a bit embarrassed.

The woman's face went slack with astonishment, then she turned to Alteira for confirmation. "Not—"

"It's him," Alteira nodded.

"I'd heard the stories, of course, but I never dreamed—! Hercules, thank the gods that you've come! Please, save my husband! Hurry! Take that road and follow it to the right. It will end in the foothills. Bring my Stamor back to me!"

"I'll do my best," Hercules promised, accepting the loss of his meal with good grace.

"Please, hurry!"

Hercules turned to Alteira, but she forestalled his speech with a raised finger. "Don't you dare try to tell me to wait here!"

"I wasn't about to!" Hercules protested. "I just wanted to apologize for the delay. I know you're eager to get to Loradon."

Alteira glanced down at Pyrro and waved goodbye to him. He shyly waved back. "Hercules," she replied softly, "even to me, the Eye of Apollo is just a stone. This is a human being we're talking about."

They followed the trail to the opening of a very dark cave; a fetid odor wafted out as they paused cautiously before entering. "Here goes," Hercules took a deep breath and stepped inside, fighting through the cobwebs.

Alteira was at his back, peering around warily. "I wish we had some swords. My hand-to-hand combat skills aren't going to be very useful against a monster."

"You could wait here—keep a lookout."

"Don't be insulting! I wouldn't leave you to face this thing alone and unarmed," she retorted indignantly.

"I do have a few attributes you don't," he pointed out.

"Don't act so superior. A little strength doesn't mean very much against a monster."

"I've also a lot more experience in this sort of thing than you do."

"Show-off." She peered nervously into the dark shadows. "What—what kind of monster do you suppose it is?"

Hercules moved forward. "Oh, it could be almost anything. A hydra, basilisk, minotaur..."

Alteira yelped and jumped backwards. Hercules spun, ready for anything. "What? What is it?"

She had already overcome her momentary surprise and moved towards one of the walls. A dimly moving form could be seen within a shadow. "There was something over—Oh for—Never mind."

Much to Hercules' alarm, she knelt down. He hurried over, remonstrating. "Be careful! Sometimes monsters can disguise themselves! What are you looking at?"

Alteira picked up a large, furry spider—the size of a small cat. "Do you suppose this could be what's spooking the villagers? Look at it. It's almost cute."

Hercules was distinctly unimpressed with the spider's cuteness. "I doubt it.... Unless they're poisonous."

She hastily dropped the creature and backed away. "Well, what kind of monster are we dealing with? Here we are, practically on its dinner plate and it hasn't bothered to show up! Are you sure that woman wasn't just trying to get rid of us? Maybe she was lying."

"The little boy too? Besides, why should she want us to leave?" Hercules scoffed, still alertly investigating the cave.

She regarded him with amusement. "If I were scrimping and saving to clothe and feed my family, and I had just spent the morning laboring over a hot oven, I wouldn't be too eager to feed some enormous stranger who shows up at my doorstep at lunchtime."

Hercules turned away huffily. "Well, I don't agree. She seemed very pleased when we arrived."

"You just can't believe that anyone wouldn't swoon over the thought of playing host to the mighty Hercules," Alteira teased.

Hercules decided to take the lofty approach and ignored her, tugging at the hanging cobwebs in order to clear a path into the next cave. "There's something hanging inside the next chamber. Wait here. I'll be right back."

Hercules exited the chamber, leaving behind a bored Alteira. She scanned the room with a disinterested gaze for a moment, then froze, staring in horror at the huge spider which had just swung noiselessly into view from the ceiling of a passageway.

Her paralyzed vocal cords couldn't manage much more than a croak. "Her—Hercules!"

The spider instantly targeted to the sound of her voice, and it shot out a mass of silk which only Alteira's upthrown arms kept from engulfing her face. The silk hardened instantly, binding her wrists together, and the spider swiftly yanked at the other end of the cord.

Alteira was jerked off her feet, but instantly she reoriented, putting her feet between herself and the spider's mouth. She kicked out at the nearest legs, but the spider delicately danced away, shifting its weight among its other seven appendages and shooting out more silk. Alteira tried to escape but only succeeded in welding her right leg to the silken mess that had trapped her arms. The spider began to draw her up to the ceiling.

When she felt her weight beginning to leave the floor, Alteira's voice returned. "Hercules! "

Hercules was in the next cavern, quizzically examining several cocoon-like objects hanging from silken ropes when he heard Alteira's scream. He bolted for the connecting passageway and arrived to find Alteira dangling from the ceiling, gamely trying to fend off the giant spider with her one free leg. Meanwhile it tried to get close enough to bite her without having its fangs knocked out by her kicks.

Taking in the scene with a single glance, Hercules dove into the room and yanked at the spider's nearest leg. The spider was dragged off-balance, not unlike what it had earlier done to Alteira, but quickly regained its footing. Discontinuing its attacks on Alteira, it zeroed in on Hercules and tried to bite him.

Hercules countered the chomp with a solid punch to the spider's equivalent of a jaw, and the arachnid was knocked backwards, dazed. Alteira alternately yelled encouragement at Hercules and abuse at the spider. Hercules followed up his advantage by trying to grapple the spider into a bearhug, but it frustrated his efforts with its numerous legs. Then he seized one leg close to where it joined the spider's thorax, pivoted on his heel, and threw the spider over his shoulder with a mighty flip. It landed atop a stalagmite and was impaled.

Hercules slowly walked over to where Alteira hung. He paused, leaning one arm against the cave wall, and tried to catch his breath. "That was great!" Alteira exclaimed, for once vocal in her praise of Hercules. "I couldn't believe it when that big hairy thing came sailing over your shoulder. It must weigh over a thousand pounds!"

"Thanks. I'm glad you noticed," Hercules panted.

"All right, all right. I'll admit it. I was wrong. Your strength does come in handy when fighting monsters."

"Does that mean you'll stop making smart remarks about my talents?" Hercules inquired, making no moves to free her.

She finally caught on. "Ha, ha. Very funny. Okay, Hercules. You can let me down now."

"Gee, I wish I could, Alteira," Hercules replied, enjoying every second of this, "but I'm just worn out from that battle. Maybe if I were a little stronger, I could—"

"What do you want—an atonement offering to your father? Get me down from here. All the blood is rushing to my head."

"That's okay. There's plenty of empty space there," he grinned.

"Oh, you're just really enjoying this, aren't you? Very heroic, Hercules, tormenting a poor helpless—"

Hercules snorted in derision, and Alteira couldn't help but laugh. "Come on. I did a pretty good job of keeping a lookout," she reminded him.

"Any better and you would have been *inside* him, looking out." Hercules broke the silk cord that was holding her and lowered her gently to the ground. Then he began work to free her, struggling to break the mass of silken fibers around her ankle. After a few moments, he wrenched her ankle free with a grunt of effort, and the instant he did so, she kicked him powerfully in the chest, knocking him back several feet.

Hercules fetched up against the far wall, outraged, but before he could yell, he realized that Alteira had turned around and was scrambling towards the far wall. Between them, right where he had been a moment ago, was a spider leg, attached to another spider even more massive than the first. Attracted by Alteira's movement, it pursued her into the second cave.

"Oh, no. Not again," Hercules groaned. He levered himself up and gave chase.

Oblivious to the hanging objects in the second chamber, Alteira desperately struggled to avoid the spider's grasp, although she was handicapped by her still-tethered wrists. She dodged and ducked as the spider sought to seize her with the venom-tipped claws at the ends of its legs. By then Hercules was on the scene, and he again yanked on one of the legs, trying to distract the spider from Alteira. This spider appeared a little smarter than the first, however, because instead of being knocked awry, it merely used two of its legs to snatch

Hercules off the ground. Robbed of his leverage, he fumbled for a grip.

The spider ignored Hercules' struggles and, bringing up a third leg, smacked him across the head. Hercules was staggered by the blow, and his struggles flagged for a moment. The spider pressed its advantage by grasping his shirt and flinging him against the far wall. He hit hard and crumpled to the ground. The spider scuttled towards him, bringing its jaws close for a bite.

Alteira, meanwhile, had been frantically searching for some kind of weapon. Almost by accident, she stumbled across an old sword, half hidden in the detritus of the cavern floor. She snatched it up and ran towards the spider just as it closed in on Hercules. Using a sweeping two-handed stroke, she hacked off the spider's leg nearest her, and the monster keened in pain, an eerie, unearthly sound. Much to her horror, it then leapt into the air, coming down scant inches from her.

She backed away. Drawing the spider away from the recovering Hercules, she parried its lunges with the blunted sword, but it was quickly able to back her against a wall. As she batted at its jaws with increasing panic, Hercules shinnied up one of the silken ropes hanging from the ceiling, swung over, and dropped onto the monster's back. The spider was momentarily confused, and Hercules took advantage of its bewilderment to lace his arms around the spider's thorax and begin to squeeze.

Almost immediately the spider tried to scrape Hercules off its back by tugging at him with its legs, but the angle was wrong. Then it leapt straight up, crushing Hercules between its body and the ceiling of the cave.

Backed against the far wall, watching in concern, Alteira called, "Hercules, I think you're winning!"

"It—oof!—doesn't feel—ow!—that way!" Hercules shouted back between slams against the rough ceiling.

The spider's jumps were weakening, but so was Hercules. An idea struck Alteira, and she gripped her rusty sword with new determination. Then, as soon as the spider had again jumped up, she dove directly underneath it and turned over, holding the sword straight up.

On its next landing, the spider fell upon the sword and its abdomen instantly exploded, spewing disgusting ichor all over Alteira. Its struggles immediately grew much weaker, and it abandoned its efforts to smash Hercules against the ceiling. Instead, it staggered around the cave while Hercules continued to crush its middle. At last, the thorax exoskeleton broke with an audible snap, and the spider collapsed.

Hercules slowly rose from the corpse, utterly exhausted, and went to help Alteira, trying to wipe goo off her face. "Are you all right?"

"I think so. Do you suppose there are any more of them?" She looked around nervously.

"I'd rather not stay long enough to find out."

"I have no argument with that plan!" Alteira exclaimed with heartfelt sincerity. "Hey, where are you going? The exit is the other way."

Hercules walked over to the hanging structures and examined them more closely. "Don't spiders often save their prey for a later meal?"

"Those are about the right size for a man!" Understanding dawned, and Alteira hurried over to the cocoon nearest her and tore at the outer covering.

"Hercules! You're right! I can feel him underneath! There are people inside these—Ugh*!*" She managed to rip the top off, only to discover a half-rotting corpse grinning back at her. She spun away, trying not to be sick.

"Come over here! I can feel movement inside these."

He ripped one cocoon apart and caught the young man who pitched out of it.

Alteira hurried to help. "Is he—"

"He's breathing. Look, there on his arm—it looks like the spider bit him. It probably injected some kind of venom that knocks out its prey."

Alteira took the man from Hercules and tried to revive him while Hercules opened the other pods. Soon they were assisting a half-dozen men from the cave. The men were pale and ill-appearing, but all moved under their own power.

Soon, back at the cottage, their little friend hugged the legs of one of the rescued men, while his mother embraced Stamor, tears running down her face. Hercules and Alteira watched happily.

"Oh, thank you, Hercules! Thank you!"

"That's all right. It was nothing," Hercules responded with an embarrassed shrug.

Leaving the family to their reunion, Alteira and Hercules made their exit. After one last backwards glance, Alteira eyed Hercules.

"What?" he asked defensively, sure Alteira was going to say something snide.

She nodded towards the family with a genuinely admiring smile. "I think I understand why you choose the life of a wandering hero, Hercules. The rewards may not be in gold, but this is even better."

That night, Hercules and Alteira rested at their campsite in companionable silence. For the first time, Hercules sensed a genuine camaraderie instead of grudging tolerance from Alteira, and it emboldened him to bring up a sensitive topic. "You saved my life today. I don't think I thanked you."

Alteira shrugged lightly. "Don't worry about it."

"This must mean that we're even—I rescued you, you rescued me," Hercules persisted.

"Are you so eager to get rid of me? Or are you trying to get out of going to Loradon? We're almost there."

"No! It's just that—I'd rather go along as your friend than as your ...'benefactor'."

"I do owe you a great deal." For the first time Alteira could say these words with sincere gratitude.

"And now I owe you, too!" Hercules said quickly.

Alteira had to laugh at his transparent attempts to weasel out of the ritual. "All right, but even so, I should still be in your service."

"Why? I'm as much in your debt as you are in mine."

"No, you're not. You saved my life at least twice against those spiders. I may have saved yours once, but I think that you'd probably have defeated them without me."

"Not at all!" Hercules objected vigorously. "And anyway, you saved me after I saved you, so what I did still counted with the first rescue, while—"

Alteira began to laugh, closely followed by Hercules. "All right, all right. I give up!"

But after another moment of mutual chuckles, she sobered and glanced over at Hercules. She spoke, slowly. This wasn't easy for her. "Hercules—I do have a favor to ask you. Do you—do you think we can start over? I ... regret some of the things I said to you."

Hercules smiled. "Start over? I don't think so. Why risk a perfectly good friendship?"

After a moment of stunned surprise, Alteira beamed. "How about helping me take off this collar?" she asked quietly.

Hercules snapped off the metal lock with ease, and they shared a smile for a long moment.

The next morning, they walked along in friendly camaraderie. "Alteira, we'll be in Loradon by this afternoon. Have you given any thought to what you'll do once we arrive?"

"I'm going to find out where they have the Eye and take it back," she answered, surprised that he would even ask the question.

"But what if they don't want to return it? I hear the queen there is—"

"They have a queen? How enlightened of them. I'm sure there will be no problem."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. I hear she's pretty vain, and not a very nice person," Hercules warned.

"She's a woman! Of course she'll understand."

"I have a suggestion. Just in case the queen isn't as progressive as you expect, maybe we should have a backup plan."

At Alteira's doubtful look, he reminded her, "Remember: I was right about fighting monsters."

"Oh, all right. I suppose you have had more experience with different peoples than I have. What do you suggest? Just stealing the Eye?"

"No. That would be—"

"Bad for your image?" she ended with a wicked grin.

With dignity, Hercules replied, "I was going to say that it would be unfair to condemn the Loradonians without even giving them the chance to do the right thing. No, my idea is that I go in and meet with the queen. I'm sure she'll show off the Eye, and I can tell her that I heard it was stolen from your people and offer to return it for her. If she refuses, then—"

"Then we steal it?"

He nodded. "Then we steal it."

"Well, I suppose that would be all right, but what if Ethrone is still there? The instant he spots me with you, he'll know we're going to take the Eye no matter what."

"That's no problem. You can wait in one of the inns, while I go to the palace. Then—"

She shook her head adamantly. "No, Hercules. I appreciate your willingness to help me, but I've got to be in the palace with you. For one thing, you won't be able to determine whether it's the real Eye—and I wouldn't put it past Ethrone to try and fob off a fake—and for another, this is my responsibility. It was my stupidity that lost the Eye; I have to be the one to get it back."

"But surely you'll accept a little help?"

"Help, yes. But I can't let you regain the Eye while I stay safe and secure in some inn."

Hercules understood her position. He felt much the same way about Hera as Alteira did about Ethrone. He thought for a minute. "What we need is some way for you to accompany me into the palace without attracting any notice."

"I don't suppose your father ever gave you a cloak of invisibility for a birthday present?" Alteira inquired wryly.

Hercules looked at her with both mischief and trepidation. "Actually, you already have one."

She gazed back blankly until he gestured at the object which is dangling from her hand. Her jaw dropped. "You're not suggesting—The slave collar?"

"People certainly ignored you when they thought you were a slave. What do you think? Would it work? Would you be willing?"

"To regain the Eye, I'd be willing to become a slave. But if this disguise is going to work, we'd better stop in the markets of Loradon before going to the palace. I need a few more props to make this disguise believable."

The next afternoon, Hercules and Alteira stood before the palace gate. Alteira was once again attired as she had been on the slave platform of Coveda, only this time the skimpy outfit included a veil, which obscured most of her face. She attempted to keep her eyes demurely downcast as Hercules engaged the two guards.

"What do you want? Move along, now."

"I'd like an audience with the queen," Hercules said politely.

"And the keys to the treasury too, no doubt! What are you, cracked? Move along before I knock some sense into you."

"Kindly inform her majesty that Hercules is here and wishes to speak with her."

The guard rolled his eyes. "Look, that's an old dodge. Claim to be some well-known figure and abuse the monarch's hospitality. But I've seen Hercules, and he's at least twice your size. So try your act someplace else."

Hercules glanced amusedly back at Alteira, who shrugged helplessly. "I really am Hercules. Please tell your queen that I'm here."

The guard grew red. "I asked you nicely. Now I'm going to tell you." He struck at Hercules with his quarterstaff.

Hercules ducked the first blow, jumped the second, then snatched the staff away from the guard. He held it out in front of him and snapped the heavy wood in two. The guards backed up, impressed.

"Um, we don't want any trouble. That was pretty impressive. But the real Hercules is much stronger than that."

Hercules sighed and cast around for a way to convince them. His eye fell upon the massive gate, firmly locked and barred. "Could anyone but the real Hercules open that gate?"

The guards exchanged a disbelieving look, then began to laugh. "Of course not. You want to try? Be our guest. I just hope your slave is good at caring for broken backs."

Hercules stepped forward and planted his feet. He pressed his palms against the portal and started to push. The gate moved. The guards exchanged glances. Hercules pushed harder. The gate creaked protestingly. He pushed still harder. The hinges of the gate began to sag. The guards backed away. Hercules lowered his head and shoved. The hinges burst free and the entire gate toppled forward with an enormous crash. Hercules looked up, dusted off his hands and stepped through. Alteira sidled in behind him.

Several guards came running up, drawn by the noise. They rushed at Hercules, swords drawn, and he blocked the first one's swing and tossed him at his colleagues. Alteira stood on the sidelines, every fiber obviously urging her to jump in. Hercules polished off another two, then a third came at him from behind. Unable to restrain herself any longer, Alteira darted forward to help.

Before she could reach him, Hercules used one guard's body as the pivot point to spin about, and he met the onrushing attacker with a powerful punch. He then planted his hand on Alteira's face and, much more gently, shoved her away before she could blow her disguise. Hercules turned to meet the other guards while Alteira fell backwards towards her observation post.

Another squad of guards ran up to reinforce the first, but before they could enter the fray, a voice shouted for them to desist.

"Stop!" The voice came from a slender woman, elegantly attired and majestic in bearing. She started down the flight of steps from the castle entrance, ignoring the battling guards in her way in the obvious belief that they would make a path between herself and her goal. Her confidence was well-founded; a clear route appeared as if by magic, and her trailing, jewel encrusted robes was not so much as brushed by a guard's sandal as they immediately broke off their attack and scrambled to withdraw.

Every Loradonian in the courtyard dropped to one knee as Queen Fiala, flanked by the original two guards, approached Hercules. She smiled at him, red hair crackling around her face, and held out her hand regally. Hercules bowed over it, registering her green eyes and full lips, as well as the guards' faces, pale with a fear that had not been there during the fight.

"Hercules," Fiala purred. "We have heard much of your exploits, but we had not expected you to visit our humble kingdom. You are welcome."

"Thank you, your majesty. I was passing through the city and wanted to pay my respects."

"A noble sentiment from a noble hero. We regret that our oafish guards did not immediately recognize you. They shall suffer for their impudence in assaulting your person."

"But I can well understand their desire to protect their queen. You are fortunate to have such loyal soldiers."

Flattered, Fiala gave a careless wave. "Well, they say slaves make the best servants. I see you agree."

Hercules followed her glance to Alteira, who instantly ducked her head in obeisance. "My, er, servant. I hope you don't object to my imposing upon your generosity in this way."

"You cannot impose—You are my welcome guest. I shall host a banquet in your honor!"

"Thank you. I've heard about your city's rich history of hospitality. I'm grateful to experience it firsthand."

"And that is not the only richness within these walls. After my servants take you to your quarters so that you may freshen up, I will show you some of my most precious treasures. Then perhaps, you can be persuaded to show me some of yours."

Hercules shrugged apologetically. "I'm sorry, your majesty, but I travel very lightly. I have nothing but the clothes on my back."

She smiled archly. "I was referring to what is beneath them."

Hercules managed a sickly smile, while Alteira's veil concealed her expression.

Hercules and Alteira were shown to a luxurious suite, where, the instant they were alone, Alteira tore off her veil, blazing mad.

"The nerve of that woman! Who does she think she is?"

"The queen?" Hercules suggested mildly.

His words did nothing to deter Alteira. "I mean, the way she pawed you as we walked up here! Disgusting! And all those veiled references to her bedchamber? What a—"

"What happened to your certainty that another woman would understand your predicament?"

"That woman is just another Ethrone. She's horrible! What a stuck-up, self-important pig. She practically informed you that sleeping with her would be the best experience of your life—and hers was a summons you couldn't refuse!"

"She didn't seem the sort to take rejection well, did she?"

"Well, I hardly think we need to prolong our stay here! Fiala certainly won't be sympathetic to a candid approach. I say we locate the Eye, grab it, and leave."

"We still don't know for certain that it's even here. Let's not get too worked up. This tour of the castle she promised should answer the first question—after that, we'll see."

"Hercules, didn't you hear what she said? We've got to get out of here before this evening! She expects you in her bed tonight!"

Hercules spoke soothingly. "Don't take her so seriously."

"I think we need to take her very seriously!" Alteira disputed. "She made her wishes perfectly plain, and much as I want the Eye back, I wouldn't ask anyone to make that sort of a sacrifice for me."

"All I'm saying is—"

Alteira interrupted him, suspicions afire. "Wait a minute. You don't want to, do you?"

"No, of course not!"

She ignored his protests, spinning around and stamping away in high fury. "I thought better of you. You'd nearly convinced me that not all men were like Ethrone, but then you're willing to—"

"All I'm saying is that I've gotten a lot of experience at talking my way out of this sort of situation, and I don't think we need to be scaling the palace walls just yet. Fiala won't do anything that might make her look foolish. The whole idea is that she's supposed to be irresistible. If I ignore the signals, that should buy us some time."

His reasoned words calmed Alteira somewhat, but she was far from confident in his plan. "I don't know, Hercules. She seemed pretty intent upon getting her way."

"Don't worry, Alteira. I know what I'm doing," he reassured her.

Fiala soon returned to escort Hercules on a tour of the castle, and even Alteira was forced to admit that the queen had a spectacular collection of *objets d'art*. Unfortunately, Hercules' ability to appreciate the beauty around him was impaired by Fiala's progressively bolder advances.

"Ah, Hercules..." the queen cooed, stroking his hair. "Didn't you find the Tiger Eye Emerald beautiful?"

He readjusted his coiffure. "Er, yes, your majesty. It was exquisite."

"And what about the Dancing White Stallions of Athens? I had to pay ten thousand dinars for them."

Hercules dodged a grope. "Very impressive. I can tell you're an avid collector of rare and valuable items."

Fiala tried to slide her hand inside his shirt. "Oh, yes. I just love unusual things. All kinds of unique objects excite me. I have to possess them. Or, at least, experience them." She eyed him significantly.

Hercules pretended not to notice. "You know, I've seen many beautiful things in my travels. One of the best was an object I saw in Karona; it's called the Eye of Apollo and it is—"

Fiala interrupted him excitedly. "But wait! I have that! It's just down the hall! Come see!"

She caught his hand and dragged him down the corridor to a heavy, locked door. It took a moment for the guard to unlock, unbar, and open it while Fiala danced impatiently. As soon as the massive portal was opened, the party squeezed inside to find a small tower room. In its center stood a pedestal on which was displayed a brilliant blue gemstone. The color seemed to pulse, as though the stone were alive. There was one window, heavily barred, in the curved wall and sunlight streamed through to illuminate the gemstone.

"Isn't it absolutely gorgeous?" Fiala asked proudly.

"Breathtaking. But how did you get it? The Karonans consider the Eye their most prized possession." Hercules was utterly sincere.

"A merchant who knows of my tastes brought it to me. For a suitably handsome reward, of course. As you get to know me, Hercules, you will learn how good a friend I can be." She grabbed for him and he sidled away, ostensibly to peer more closely at the Eye. He glanced back at Alteira, and she nodded imperceptibly. It was the real thing.

"This is very impressive, your majesty, but I can't believe this merchant came by the Eye legitimately, and the Karonans are certain to be devastated by the loss."

The queen tossed her head. "Foo, what do I care for those stupid Karonans? If they were careless enough to lose the Eye, it's my good fortune and their ill luck."

Alteira was infuriated at this remark and opened her mouth for a hot retort. Hercules frowned at her warningly, and she reluctantly subsided.

"Don't let's talk of Karona, Hercules. I want to talk of us. Doesn't the color of the Eye remind you of something?" She batted her eyelashes at him as a prompt.

Alteira snorted under her breath. "Maybe if the Eye were bloodshot and surrounded by wrinkles there'd be a resemblance."

"The Eye truly is magnificent, your majesty. May I pick it up?"

"I don't think that would be a wise idea, majesty!" Everyone turned as a new man entered the room. He was as tall as Hercules and excessively good-looking.

"This is Ethrone, the agent who obtained the Eye for me. Why do you object, Ethrone? Haven't I already paid you for the Eye?"

"And a very handsome price it was, your majesty," Ethrone oozed unctuously. "I just meant that it might not be a good idea for Hercules to touch the Eye."

"And why not? Who are you to say which of my guests may touch my treasures?" Fiala demanded, annoyed.

"Forgive me, oh most gracious sovereign, but it is said that the Eye has special powers when wielded by an immortal, and while I imagine that most of these stories are mere superstitious twaddle of a primitive people, there may be a grain of truth to them. One story states that if an immortal holds the Eye, it will transport him to Apollo's side instantly. Another says it will carry him to Mount Olympus itself."

"But I'm not—" Hercules began.

"I apologize, my queen, but I wish only to safeguard your treasure, and I am certain that mighty Hercules would not wish to jeopardize your possession of the Eye."

Fiala looked hungrily at the Eye. "No, of course not. I appreciate your caution, Ethrone. I should be most displeased if anything were to happen to the Eye. I'm sorry, Hercules. Perhaps I can make it up to you later."

Hercules smiled weakly at Fiala's leer. Alteira struggled not to react to Ethrone's presence. It had taken all of her self-control not to lunge at him when he'd first appeared, especially after he made that remark about "primitives".

"Shall we go, Hercules? I must get ready for the banquet this evening. I intend the evening to be unforgettable," Fiala promised.

Back in their suite, Alteira paced, trying to suppress her rage. Hercules was oblivious, deep in thought as he stared out a window.

"That slug!" Alteira hissed. "Did you hear him? Calling us names, as if we were some aboriginal tribe squatting in the marshes! Karona has been among the most modern lands for over four centuries!"

"What about those stories he told? Are they true?"

"Huh?" Alteira was distracted. "Oh, I don't know. Why? What does it matter?"

"It could make a big difference in terms of how we try to get the Eye back. If I can touch the Eye, it's no problem. I can break through that door in a second, and after that, it's just a question of getting out before the alarm is sounded. If I can't touch the stone, though, then things could get complicated."

Alteira finally began to focus on the question at hand. She thought for a moment. "I don't know, Hercules. I've heard the tales Ethrone mentioned, but I never paid much attention to them. We don't have any immortals in Karona, nor do we have much use for them. Those stories about the Eye sort of got forgotten. They could be true though. But—are you really an immortal?"

Hercules was amused at her expression. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"Let's just say I thought a god would be—bigger."

Genuinely nettled, Hercules snapped, "Do you know how often I hear that? It's not like I'm extraordinarily short! Why do—"

"Hercules. Hercules? Could we stay focused, please? Remember? The reason we're here? The Eye?"

He cleared his throat. "Right. Sorry. Anyway, the point is that I may not be immortal, but I do have immortal blood, and if the Eye has some special properties, that might be all it will take. Apollo loves gadgets, and he hates it when his things go missing. It's easy to believe he'd rig the Eye to do something to any immortal who touches it."

"Wait a minute. You actually know Apollo?"

Hercules shrugged off-handedly. "Sure. He can be kind of arrogant, but he's not a bad sort. When he's in the right mood, it can be fun to hang out with him."

Alteira shook her head incredulously. "I can't believe I'm sitting here while you discuss a god as though he were one of your drinking buddies."

"He is," Hercules admitted with a hint of apology.

"Don't do that," Alteira ordered.

He hid a smile. "Sorry. Anyway, back to the Eye. If I can't touch it—"

"What's the problem? I can. "

"Yes, but—"

She eyed him warningly. "This isn't going to be one of those 'You stand off to one side while the Son of Zeus takes care of things', is it?"

Hercules cleared his throat guiltily. "No. Not at all."

"Good. Now what I was thinking was that we would stay here for a few days, getting the lay of the land, and then, once we know the guards' schedules, I'll slip in and grab the stone. You can be keeping the others busy and—"

"Actually, I have a problem with that," Hercules interrupted.

"Oh?" Her tone was forbidding.

"Yes. I don't think it's such a good idea for us to hang around Loradon. Ethrone might recognize you and then, as you pointed out, we're done for."

Alteira blinked. This wasn't what she'd been expecting. "But in the treasure room today, he was as close to me as you are now, and he didn't realize who I was. I don't think there's any danger."

"But what if he were to catch sight of you without the veil? Every extra second we stay here puts you in danger," Hercules insisted doggedly.

Alteira was honestly confused. "But you were the one who said we should—Wait a minute. Are you beginning to have second thoughts about your ability to handle Fiala?"

He looked away. "I didn't expect her to be so, er, persistent."

She grinned. "Okay, Hercules. I understand. Sure, we can go back to my original plan and just snatch the stone and *run*. Let's go."

Hercules sighed with relief and followed Alteira to the door of their suite. She pulled it open and froze, stunned to find a squad of guards poised to knock.

"Excuse me, Hercules." The squad leader bowed. "I have been sent by Her Majesty to escort you to the banquet."

"Oh. Well, thanks, but I thought I'd take a quick walk first—to build up my appetite."

The captain exchanged a significant glance with his men. "I don't think you have to worry. And the Queen is waiting."

"Ah. Thank you. Er, slave, you wait here. I'll be back later."

He walked away with the soldiers; the captain of the guard paused long enough to wink at Alteira. "Don't expect him until morning. At the earliest."

To the left of the bolted door leading to the room in which the Eye was kept, a large soldier stood watch. Alteira walked up, exuding "charm". "Hi, there. Are you all alone up here?"

The guard ran his eyes over her form with interest. "Yup. What about you? Don't you belong to that Hercules guy? The one whom the Queen's taken such a fancy to?"

"Uh huh. He's at a banquet with her right now, and I've got nothing to do," she pouted.

"Really?"

"But I guess you're on duty, right?" she asked, twining a lock of hair about her finger.

"Well, technically I am, but it's not like anyone's going to break into the palace to steal the Eye!"

"What a silly idea!" Alteira laughed with him.

"Hey, have you seen it? The Eye, I mean."

She shook her head. "I couldn't before. The others were crowding around too closely."

The soldier glanced up and down the corridor. "Want to go in and take a look? And while we're in there, we could..."

Alteira jumped up and down, clapping her hands. "You read my mind!"

Meanwhile, the soldiers had escorted Hercules through the palace, stopping at a set of ornately carved doors. They politely ushered Hercules inside, where he looked about, expecting to see a large table and dozens of other guests. Instead, he was in what appeared to be a decadent bedroom.

Fiala called to him from the far end of the room. "Hercules! How nice of you to come!"

Hercules averted his eyes from the filmy wisps covering her. "Um... I thought there was going to be a banquet."

She came closer. "Silly man. There is. This night will fulfill your wildest dreams. I can sate your most passionate hungers."

Hercules backed away, trying vainly to keep distance between them. "Fiala, it's not that I don't find your interest flattering; really, I do. But it's just that, when I look for someone, it'll be a person with whom I can settle down."

"How sweet," she crooned, cornering him. "You're a homebody at heart. But what's the rest of you like?"

Hercules captured her hands as she tried to run them over his body. "Your majesty. Perhaps I should have made my position clear when I first arrived...."

Fiala placed her finger against his lips. "Hush, Hercules. Nobody likes a man who never stops chattering. I've heard legends about your mighty 'prowess'. Why don't you show me an example?"

He pulled away. "I think we're talking about two different things."

The queen folded her arms with a sigh of irritation. "I'm getting a little tired of this coy act."

"It's not an act. I mean, I'm not trying to mislead you. I just don't happen to have any interest in—uh—you. Romantically, I mean. I'm sure you're a very nice person, but—"

Fiala burst into laughter. "Oh, Hercules, you are sweet. And so old-fashioned. But let me remind you of a few things. I don't care if you're not interested in me. That doesn't matter. What does matter is that I'm interested in you, and since this is my kingdom, that's all that counts. Now, we can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way—it really doesn't matter to me. In fact, the hard way might be kind of fun."

Hercules glared at her. "I'm not one of your subjects, Fiala."

She waved a blithe hand. "No, but the thirty guards outside my door are, and I think that they—or their hundreds of colleagues—can successfully overcome whatever resistance your pride feels compelled to muster. And even if you manage to defeat them and run away—and what a blow to your reputation that would be!—you'd have to leave your slave behind, and I can think of some very inventive ways to revenge myself upon her. They say you're very tender-hearted, Hercules. Would you really sacrifice your slave just to satisfy your silly whims?"

Hercules' reply was interrupted by a robed and hooded slave who entered the bedroom from a door behind Fiala. The woman carried a tray with several objects on it, all of which were hidden by gauzy scarves. The queen glanced backwards at the slave's approach.

"Oh, you stupid woman," she said dismissively. "I told you not to bring those in until later. Well, you might as well put the tray down. Hercules—wouldn't you like to see what fun we could have?"

She moved closer, sliding her hands up onto his shoulders. Hercules opened his mouth to tell her off, but before he could do so, the slave came up behind Fiala and clonked her on the head with a rock. The hood fell off with the movement of the blow, and Hercules stared in shock at Alteira.

"You're a disgrace to women everywhere! You might just as well have been a man!" Alteira hissed at the unconscious Fiala.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were going to steal the Eye!"

Alteira showed him the rock with which she had clocked Alteira. It was the Eye itself. "We don't all work as slowly as you do. I was in that room in less than two minutes, thanks to that guard's overheated imagination. Then, while he was fumbling with his armor, I grabbed the Eye, knocked him out, and came looking for you. I had a feeling that Fiala's 'banquet' might turn out to be a more intimate affair—it was exactly the sort of dodge Ethrone would have used."

"And you just assumed I'd need your help?" In truth, Hercules was more relieved than offended.

"Are you kidding? If you hadn't turned that cow down, I was here to conk you. You're restoring my faith in men, Hercules, but I wasn't taking any chances."

"She'll be out for hours. Let's get out of here!"

"You go first. My leaving the palace won't raise any eyebrows, but yours might. If you sneak out alone, you might have better luck. Go out the way I came—it's a back exit to the servants' quarters. I'll meet you outside the walls, by the north corner of the palace."

Hercules nodded and hurried out. He stealthily entered the long hallway, heading for the door at the far end. Before he could get there, however, it opened to admit a squad of guards. Hercules dodged into a window alcove, pressing in to avoid being seen.

The guards were obviously on a break, and they ranged themselves across the wall, chatting in a desultory fashion. Hercules snuck a peek and, seeing that they are unlikely to move, prepared to creep out the way he came. Just then, from that very direction, another squad hove into view.

In a few short seconds, he would be trapped between the two groups, and it would then be only a matter of time before someone noticed him skulking in the shadows. He glanced around desperately, his eye falling upon the barred window. If only the casing were loose enough...

He hurried over and twined his fingers about the grille. A quick jerk, and then through the open frame—As the newly arrived squad walked past the alcove to greet their comrades, the empty alcove drew no attention. It was only from the distance of a few inches that fingers could be seen holding the window grille in place from the outside.

Hercules stood outside the palace, holding the window's bars in place with brute strength. He had escaped the squads by yanking the entire grille out in one piece and exiting through the window, but he then found it difficult to get the bars to return to their place. Every time he thought he had it balanced, it began to tip. He didn't dare let it fall lest the noise of the crash attract the guards, but he grew more desperate as each passing second raised the risk that someone would notice him.

"Hey!" A hobo, slumped in a drunken daze at the far end of the alley, finally noticed the interloper.

"Would you mind keeping your voice down, please?" Hercules whispered.

"Whaddya think you're doing? This is my alley. You're trespassing!" the tramp informed him balefully.

"Ssssssh! I'm just leaving, honest!"

"Then move it! Whaddya want there, anyway? Trying to see into the palace?"

"No! Look, would you please be quiet?"

"Who do you think you are, to invade a man's home and then tell *him* how to behave? You've got a nerve!"

"I'm sorry. I just don't want to attract any attention!"

"Yeah? Why not?"

Hercules' mind raced. "Well, I— Hey, what am I thinking of? I can't tell you what I'm doing!"

Affronted, the hobo demanded, "And why not? You're doing it in my home!"

"Well, you have a point there. Hmmmm. Okay, but if I tell you, how do I know you won't want in on the money?"

The bum moved closer. "Money? What money?"

"Ooops, me and my big mouth."

The other man came close, dropping his voice. "You can trust me. What money? What's going on?"

Hercules leaned towards him conspiratorially. "You see this window? Well, the grille is loose. I'm waiting for the queen to walk by so that I can let it drop. She'll look over here, I'll put the grille back for her, and she'll give me a reward."

"Hey!" the hobo yelped. "Some nerve! That grille dropped off in my alley! If anyone has the right to cash in on it, it's me! Now leggo and get outta here!"

Hercules hung his head and meekly relinquished the grille to the triumphant tramp. As soon as he was free of the burden, he sprinted away. "Just like Atlas," he said to himself with satisfaction.

Once Hercules was safely away, Alteira wrapped the Eye safely in her veil and hid it underneath the folded robe in her arms. She then left Fiala's bedroom, pausing at the threshold to make sure that Fiala was securely trussed on the floor. All was well, so she shut the door and turned around, only to find herself eye to eye with Ethrone.

"Excuse me, I just wanted to ask the Queen if she would—*Alteira?!*"

Alteira cursed and struggled to free an arm from her heavy robe so that she could throw a punch, but Ethrone didn't give her the chance. Immediately putting two and two together, he shoved her backwards and fled. She dropped the robe, stuffed the Eye in her top, and dashed in pursuit.

Safely back among the anonymous crowds, Hercules waited just outside the north gate, anxiously scanning the palace courtyard for Alteira. His concentrated gaze soon attracted the attention of two nearby guards.

"Hey. You need something, buddy?"

"Um, just trying to catch a glimpse of the Queen." Hercules offered the first innocent explanation he could invent.

"Yeah, she's some looker all right."

His partner looked around nervously. "Ssssh!"

"Ah, come on," the first man persisted, undeterred. "I'm not saying anything we're not all thinking. I bet there isn't a man in the kingdom who wouldn't give his left arm for a night with her. Am I right?"

"Well, there might be one or two men who wouldn't be interested," Hercules allowed.

"Are you crazy? Look, if you had the chance to take her in your arms, trust me, you'd do it."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

Hercules' eyes widened as he suddenly saw two figures pelt onto the battlements above. He immediately recognized Ethrone and Alteira, and he quickly engaged the guards in conversation to keep them from noticing as well.

"I—uh—I guess that you must get to see the Queen a lot, working at the palace the way you do."

"Well, I don't like to brag, but..."

Ethrone saw the guards below and leaned over to yell to them, giving Alteira the chance to catch up. She grabbed him, and her elbow in his midriff aborted Ethrone's shout. Despite the blow, he was able to thrust her away and regain his balance. The shove made Alteira trip over her flowing hem, and she fell to the narrow ledge, but as Ethrone tried to dart past, she grabbed his ankle, dropping him beside her. Then the two wrestled—Ethrone trying either to send Alteira over the edge or to catch the guards' attention, Alteira desperately smothering Ethrone's yells with her hand, sleeve, or anything else that's handy.

"You witch! I should have killed you when I had the chance," Ethrone panted.

"You're damn right you should have!" Alteira replied, throwing a credible right hook.

Then Ethrone caught sight of the Eye, and he snatched at it. Alteira misunderstood his intention and her temper waxed even hotter. "Don't flatter yourself, you single minded cretin!" she snarled, striking his hand away.

"Give me back the Eye, or I'll have the Queen boil you alive," he threatened.

"Your stock with Fiala might go down once she realizes you've lost her the Eye. Or didn't you mention that we 'primitives' always come after what is rightfully ours?"

"You stupid female. I can manipulate that lust-crazed moron as easily as I duped you! Guards*!*"

Alteira dove to cover his mouth.

Down below, one guard paused in his conversation with Hercules to ask his partner, "Did you just hear something?"

"Tell me more about your work—is there room for advancement?" Hercules hastily asked.

"Well, promotion is—You know, I did hear something that time. Where do you suppose it's coming from?"

Hercules watched helplessly as Ethrone took advantage of Alteira's proximity to the edge of the battlement to try shoving her off. The guards below glanced about in bewilderment.

"Um—What do you like most about your job?"

"Why all these questions? Are you thinking of joining up or something?" one guard asked.

On the castle walls, Alteira continued to struggle with Ethrone. He was bruised and bleeding, but her last kick gave him just enough distance to scramble out of reach and he made it to his feet with a triumphant laugh. "I win, Alteira. Again."

He turned to shout to the guards below, and in desperation, Alteira called out to him. "Ethrone! Catch!"

He looked automatically, and she flung the Eye at him. He lunged for it and lost his balance on the narrow walkway. At the edge, he teetered for a moment, desperately fighting for his balance. Alteira dove towards him and sprawled at the edge just as he went over. She grabbed his wrist as he slipped past.

"**Agggghhhh*!***" Ethrone screamed.

Even the intellect-challenged guards couldn't miss Ethrone's shriek, and they gaped upwards.

"Oh swell," Hercules muttered.

He tapped the first guard on the shoulder and, when he turned, clouted him on the jaw. Before the other one knew what was going on, he was laid out alongside his friend, and Hercules sprinted towards the battlements.

Alteira meanwhile had wiggled to a sitting position, her back against the palace wall. She still had Ethrone's wrist; his other hand was locked in a death grip on one of her extended legs.

"Don't let me fall! I'll give you the Eye! I'll give you anything!"

"Shut—up and—climb up here," Alteira gasped between clenched teeth.

Hand over hand, Ethrone climbed about halfway up before she halted his progress with a boot at his throat. "Wait. The Eye. Give it to me."

"I, um, I dropped it."

"Oh? Pity." She twisted her wrist out of his grasp, and he let out a piercing yell of terror, grabbing frantically at her legs.

"All right! All right!"

She snatched hold of him again. "Well?"

While one hand firmly clutching Alteira's wrist, Ethrone fumbled with the other one until, a moment later, he dropped the Eye onto the stone beside her. She freed one hand and examined it.

"That's it, for the gods' sake! Pull me up! Pull me up!"

Satisfied that the object was genuine, Alteira dragged Ethrone the rest of the way onto the battlement. He collapsed onto the stone, sobbing in relief.

Alteira rose, tucking the Eye into her top, and ran a disdainful eye over Ethrone's pitiful form. "I must have been insane," she murmured to herself.

With his sole remaining spark of malice, Ethrone glared up at her. "You'll never make it out of here. Can't you hear the guards running up to the battlements? Maybe if you give the Eye back and agree to be nice to me, I can protect you."

"I'd rather kill myself," she told him scornfully. And she hopped off the battlement, right before Ethrone's stunned eyes.

Below, Hercules neatly caught Alteira's plummeting form and set her down on the ground.

"You might have looked before you leaped," he remonstrated, a touch aggrieved. "What if I hadn't been in position?"

Alteira grinned with sheer exuberance. "Don't be silly. All the myths are unanimous—you're always exactly where you're needed. Now let's get out of here before we're caught!"

Hercules spared an apprehensive glance upwards. "What did you do to him?"

Alteira sniffed. "Nothing. I thought I'd leave him to Fiala. Better that she take her frustrations out on him than on some poor innocent slave. Besides, they deserve each other."

Hercules shook his head in reluctant admiration and followed her out the gate and into the crowds.

On a bluff overlooking the coast, Hercules and Alteira stood together. A vessel's sails could be seen approaching over the horizon.

"Are you sure you don't want to come to Karona with me?" Alteira asked, a bit forlorn.

"I'm sure I do, but this way I can lay a false trail for Fiala's men to follow. Besides, there's still work for me here. Who knows—maybe the right person could convince the Loradonians to do away with Fiala and slavery in one fell swoop."

"It would take a hero... but I know one. How can I thank you, Hercules? You saved my life—and my faith in others. How can I repay you?"

Hercules squirmed. "I didn't do that much. You saved yourself, and me a few times, too. I'm just glad I was around to help."

She embraced him, her eyes glistening. "If the struggles ever get to be too much, and you want a respite, come to Karona. You'll love it there, and you won't be bothered by your pesky relatives. No immortal has visited us for centuries."

"Thanks. Someday I'll take you up on that."

"And don't forget: if you ever need help, just ask. I'll be there before you know it," she promised, blinking back her tears.

"Take care."

She slowly started for the beach. "You too. Oh, and remember, whatever you do, don't trust dinner invitations from unscrupulous monarchs."

"You forgot the most important warning!" Hercules called after her.

"What's that?" she asked, puzzled.

"Beware of bargains at the slave market!"

Alteira made a rude face at him, and with a smile, Hercules turned to continue on his way.

ARCHIVES

Dorothy Johnston

People react to the end of the world in different ways. Some try to preserve what they can. Others merely try to survive while some become so busy saving others they forget to save themselves.

Until the afternoon of July second, Eileen Conorty had been enjoying her vacation. She would be retiring to North Carolina at the end of the year and had decided it made no sense to pay good money for a bus tour of Washington, DC some time in the future when she could do a much better job for – nearly — free now.

Eileen had spent the past four days doing all the touristy things: taking the White House and FBI tours, visiting Arlington, and tramping up the Mall and down it, not missing a museum. So as the line snaked through the velvet ropes toward the Declaration and Constitution, she was tired but buoyed by a feeling of Mission Accomplished.

I'm glad I saved this for last, Eileen thought as the line shifted forward. *I need something uplifting after the Holocaust Museum. God, it's depressing what people can do to one another.*

About then a distant thunder rumbled overhead and the massive Archives building trembled.

"I didn't know Washington had earthquakes," commented the man ahead of her in line; he was from somewhere out West, Eileen thought, based on his accent and the dark brown Stetson he was holding.

"We don't," Eileen replied. She shrugged and added, "Probably just a couple of trucks colliding. Hope nobody got hurt."

The man placidly agreed and both resumed their quiet waiting.

Not everyone agreed, though. The line behind Conorty melted away, doors could be heard slamming and—were those screams?

Nettled by these occurrences but not truly concerned, Eileen decided to stay. With all the desertions, she was now only seventh in line.

A guard ran up to the one standing by the head of the line. Whatever she whispered into his ears made the man sag against the Declaration's cabinet.

Oh, no; something's happened to President Whitmore, was Conorty's immediate thought. Remembering other sad occasions, she forced back tears and moved up. Fourth in line now. Close enough to a muffled argument between the guards.

"But the viewing hours are..." protested the first guard.

Guard Number Two hurriedly waved this off. "This is straight from the Archivist, Charley." The guard pointed at Conorty. "As soon as that woman has viewed them, the Documents go back into the vault."

Aware that the guards were antsy, Conorty took only a moment to admire "the Documents," just long enough to irrelevantly wonder if any of the Signers' fingerprints were still on them. Then, uttering a brief prayer for the presumably injured President, she walked out into the end of the world.

Eileen clasped her hands to her mouth and flopped down onto the shallow, broad steps. Later, she never remembered how long she had stared upward at the dark gray immensity that had obliterated the Washington sky. She couldn't even recall how she made her way to a nearby drugstore. Her next clear memory was of glaring at a frightened clerk who plainly wanted to join the packs already running for the hills.

"Look," she told him, "either sell me these instant cameras or call the police! I'm not leaving here without them."

The Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute tore her eyes from the monstrosity hanging overhead. Gail Stimson walked stiffly past packs of goggle-eyed tourists and into the red brick Castle. Inside, she paused to glance into the alcove where the Founder lay at rest. "Sir James, we're in trouble," she whispered.

The old building was especially silent now, the muffled echoes of rapidly accumulating fenderbenders the only noises penetrating its walls. Instead of the elevator, Stimson walked up two flights to her temporary office.

She was not surprised to find Lacy Benton, her secretary, staring out a window in the inner office. The heavyset black woman, who had stayed on when Stimson's predecessor had left the previous December under a bit of a cloud, started when her boss' chair creaked.

"Oh, Dr. Stimson, I didn't hear you...." Benton involuntarily glanced back at the darkened sky.

"That's quite all right, Lacy. If you want to leave early, I understand." The Secretary was mildly surprised at the calm she heard in her own voice." But first, personally call whoever is actually running things at the museums and the zoo. Tell them I've called an emergency meeting in the Castle. If they and their security chief can get here in, " Stimson looked at the wall clock, "twenty minutes, fine. Otherwise, they're to listen in by conference call. Once that's arranged, you're free to go. "

As Benton headed for her own desk, Stimson added, "Take my advice and go a lot farther than home."

What? And miss all the fireworks in here? the career employee wryly thought. "With all those people, it'll get pretty crowded in here," Benton warned.

"We'll use one of the reception halls on the ground floor. Oh, and tell the guard at the desk I'm closing the building. This is one meeting that is definitely not open to the public."

All survivors of this last official Castle meeting later agreed that none of the actual museum staff disagreed with the Secretary's extraordinary evacuation decision. As might have been expected, the sole, vociferous and loud objections were raised by a lawyer.

"Are you out of your mind, Madame Secretary?!" On ordinary days, Kevin Billiel's violently thundered question would have alarmed passersby on the Mall.

The general counsel did not wait for an answer before rolling on. "What you're suggesting involves, among other things, grand larceny, grand theft auto, interstate transportation of stolen goods, and misuse of government property and personnel!"

He paused for breath, hoping for and dismayed to find no supporters in his silent audience. He tried again. "And if you people will give me five minutes with Westlaw, I'm sure I can dig up lots more to put on your rap sheets!"

"Oh, it won't be that bad," chirped Nancy Dutton. The specialist in Amerindian folklore was marking time running Natural History until the new Native American museum was completed later in the summer. "We can always claim to be carrying out the terms of the original bequest, after all."

"Excuse me!," said Billiel, unaware that the rest of the meeting was equally befuddled.

Unfazed, Dutton was happy to explain. "I'm talking about Sir James Smithson's will. You know, the part where it talks about 'the increase and diff—" She never finished.

"God give me strength!," Billiel roared. He turned and stared out at the Mall. Regaining his composure or, perhaps, not caring for the present view, he turned back and leaned against the edge of the table, trying one last time to bring these fools to their senses. "People, Uncle Sam is not famous for his sense of humor. I'm talking about Serious Time in the Big House."

For a moment, there was no reaction. Then Amos Carter, who'd been guarding Air & Space since it had been little more than a hole in the ground, broke the uneasy silence by slapping the table. "Look, Billiel, when I see a bunch of men in white sheets walking down the street, and they all have pointy little hoods with eye slits cut in them, I don't need some Pollyanna telling me there's a convention of linen salesmen in town!!"

Maybe the former trial lawyer was stunned by being called Pollyanna or, as some would later argue, Billiel had simply been testing his clients' resolve, to see how deeply they were committed. Whatever the reason, Billiel grinned, pulled up a chair and sat down. "I'm in."

The managing director of DC's Metrorail system put down his phone. He looked at his public relations officer, who had entered his office to provide an update on how the system was handling the unusual—for a non-snowday—mid-day stress. "That was the Secretary of the Smithsonian. She wanted to know if the Smithsonian could 'borrow' excess space in our stations. After a little discussion, I said yes."

Arvid Nygren's jaw dropped. "Boss, the crowds are behaving well given the circumstances, but the stations are jammed. Besides, the Smithsonian has enough storage space of its own."

The director shook his head. Nygren hadn't caught on yet. "The Secretary reminded me of all the railed-off spaces on the boarding platforms, behind the escalators. Just the place, she says, for all their vital personnel files, the ones that absolutely must be preserved in case of catastrophe." The director jerked a thumb towards the ceiling. "Not that they expect anything to happen, mind you."

Nygren had caught on now, but he still folded his arms. "To quote Rush, that's Barbara Streisand! Sir."

"I know," replied the director. "Still, as long as they don't put anything easily movable or obviously pawnable on the platforms, it should be OK."

Nygren chuckled for the last time that day. "Oh, I imagine the Hope Diamond's already on its way out of town."

"Probably," agreed the managing director, absent-mindedly tapping a ballpoint pen against his cheek. "Nygren, if it looks like all hell is about to break loose, what will people do? The ones that don't get clear in time?"

"Head for the basement, I suppose." Nygren shrugged. "Or just run for the nearest Metro station. The Northwest Red line stations are pretty deep; people should be safe in them."

"Exactly." The director came to a decision. "Nygren, do it as quietly as possible but start getting boxes of 'maintenance supplies' into the underground stations. We don't want those escalators to give out on the Fourth, do we?"

"Indeed we don't. I'll get right on it."

Stimson, all things considered, was feeling pretty chipper as she cut across the Mall toward Natural History. Metro had been most cooperative, going so far as to promise that if any trains had to be taken out of service for minor technical glitches, the first one would be shuttled over to Smithsonian station.

The museums were running smoothly, with no arguments about the course she'd selected; better yet, each one had turned up pockets of tourists who had offered their help. With this unexpected bounty, there had been a rough division of labor. The professional staff devoted most of their efforts into selecting and moving out the must-save/can-save objects, using whatever vehicles were available. The volunteers, under the careful eyes of the guards, began trying to shift the vast remainder of objects into the marginal safety of basements and parking garages.

Over at the Freer, Reynolds had turned up a genuine horde of volunteers. "Sixty-one!" exclaimed the Secretary into her staticy cell phone. "Where did they all come from?"

"Well, there's a group of Japanese retirees and then there's an incoming senior class at a high school in one of your Midwestern states—Iowa, Indiana, one of those," Reynolds replied. The British authority on Whistler had been spending a happy sabbatical year wandering around the Freer, occasionally filling in for permanent staff who were ill or on vacation. "This was the last day in Washington for both groups. They are already checked out of their respective hotels and their luggage has been sent to National Airport."

Which of course was effectively closed with the drastic reduction in available airspace. Stimson knew that a few small props and private jets might be getting out; maybe even a plane or so from the express package services, but not the big airliners. "They should have picked Dulles flights," Stimson remarked.

"Indeed they should," agreed Reynolds. "I've put about a third of them into a bucket chain in the tunnel between here and the Sackler." Unseen, Stimson nodded and blessed the circumstances that had forced the underground construction of the Sackler. "Since I have a surfeit of helpers, where should I send the overflow?" Reynolds asked.

"Split them among National Gallery, Air & Space, and Natural History. I'm heading there now."

"Madame Secretary, what's going on around here?"

Stimson flinched. She turned and saw a thin, balding man in sweatshirt and jeans at the wheel of a nondescript van that she knew was packed to the gills with electronic gear. She recognized him as the all-night reporter for one of DC's most important radio stations.

"Hello, Larry, I didn't know they let you out in daylight."

The man laughed. "Today, everybody

gets called out. I repeat, what's the Smithsonian up to? I see an awful lot of activity around the museums. Is some sort of evacuation going on?"

"Evacuate? Why on earth would we want to evacuate?"

Larry pointed upwards.

Stimson blushed. "They probably just want a good seat for the fireworks on the Fourth."

Larry shook his head. "Oh, sure. And you're just strolling the Mall, cell phone in hand, for your health. Come on, what's going on?"

A most welcome distraction ended the confrontation. An official-looking black limousine pulled up near Natural History. Simultaneously, Billiel and the curator of the Mineral collection came running down the steps, each carrying two bulky briefcases. These were quickly handed into the car, which sped off toward the west.

The reporter's look spoke volumes.

Stimson swallowed hard and blandly asked, "What's the matter, Larry? Haven't you ever seen joggers on the Mall before?"

"Joggers!" Larry repeated derisively. "I give up."

Billiel had joined her by the time the van had made the turn for Constitution Avenue. "You can stop worrying about Sikes or any other reporter," the counsel announced. He placed an unsealed envelope in her hands. "This will shut up everyone. Go ahead; read it."

Stimson followed her lawyer's advice. Inside, on a single sheet of Supreme Court stationary, was a hastily-written note authorizing the Secretary of the Smithsonian to do all in her power to preserve the museums' collections.

She looked up. "Thanks. This takes a load off my mind. But why did they all sign? The Chief Justice is the only one that's a regent."

Billiel grinned. "That was O'Connor's idea. She pointed out that the entire Supreme Court showing up on the defense's witness list would quench the ardor of the most zealous prosecutor. By the way, you can scratch the historic jewelry collection off your worry list. I just handed it over to the Chief Justice."

"So that's what was in the bags! They're evacuating too?"

Billiel nodded. "Very unofficially. Right after our friends showed up, Justice Thomas decided to invite the gang out to his place for an end of session barbecue."

"He lives in one of the more remote Virginia suburbs, doesn't he?" asked Stimson as she and Billiel walked back toward the organized chaos of Natural History.

"Yes."

"And are the other Justices making themselves unindicted co-conspirators?"

"Yes. Most are taking out paintings; the DaVinci and the Vermeers have already gone in Scalia's car. Souter's stopping by the Library of Congress to pick up a Gutenberg Bible and a few other rare books. Seems the Library is run by as big a bunch of crooks as you people are."

After the fifth—or maybe only the fourth—resident of the Lansburgh apartments hurried into its small ground-floor grocery store, made the same basic purchase and rushed out to a waiting car or around to the garage, Jhoon Kim snorted.

Grover Wilson looked up from where he'd been nervously sweeping the same stretch of floor for an hour. Sad to say, it wasn't usual for young blacks and Korean merchants to get along—at least in D.C.—but the teenager liked the old man. "Are you okay, Mr. Kim?"

"Look at them!" exploded Kim, waving an irritated arm at the rapidly emptying streets. Bread, milk and toilet paper. Bread, milk, and toilet paper! That's all they're buying."

Wilson chuckled. "Oh, come on, Mr. Kim. You've lived in Washington long enough to know that it doesn't take much—a raindrop, a rumor of a snow flurry—"

"A flying saucer!"

"—to send DC folk running to the stores. They gotta have their BMT."

"Foolishness! If the beings in that ship do attack, people will need more than bread, milk and toilet paper!"

Geez, each time he says it, he gets redder in the face, thought Wilson. The future mayor of Washington then made his first great speech. "Well, if it bothers you so much, do something about it."

Larry Sikes was driving down Constitution Avenue in the general direction of the White House, having spent a depressing hour driving around to some of the lesser-known museums. At each, the same activity he had seen on the Mall was repeated, if on a lesser scale. And at the height of what should have been a muggy afternoon rush hour, the street lamps were shining over empty pavements

The police band was reporting that the

roads out were snarling toward complete gridlock, with a few desperate souls attempting to use the other side of the road to get out. So far, the authorities were keeping a lid on that. So far.

But here, in what despite downsizing and changes in the local economies was the region's heart, the city's pulse could barely be felt. Oh sure, lights were on in most buildings, but the only real activity was in and around the White House. The city was as quiet as...Sikes refused to complete the thought.

Passing the Navy Memorial, he started and jammed on the brakes. For a brief second, it had looked as if the Lonesome Sailor was pulling out with the rest of the population. But no, the bronze statue was still gazing out at the maps of the world's oceans. It was a policeman who was crossing the broad plaza. One, moreover, that he knew. "George Putnam," Sikes called out of his van window, "You just scared me out of a year's growth."

The policeman stopped. "Sorry, Larry."

"Had a busy day?" Sikes asked.

"Earlier, the car accidents kept me hopping. The last hour or so," Putnam shrugged, "it's been quiet as...it's been quiet."

"No rioting or looting?"

"Not around here. Adams-Morgan and Shaw have a few disturbances but nothing you'd really call a riot." Putnam lowered his voice and looked around. "Don't quote me on this, Larry, but the word's come down—only investigate places with signs of forced entry. If someone's been dumb enough to run off and leave the store open or unlocked?" He shrugged. The inference was plain.

Sikes nodded. "Sounds like a day at the beach compared to what's going on in New York. You've heard about that mess?"

"I have," replied Putnam. "But, hey, it's a lot bigger city and it is a lot harder to get out of than DC. And no one's running east to Long Island, not today. What have you been up to, Larry?"

Sikes began returning the informational favor. Putnam listened with interest until Sikes began describing what he'd seen on the Mall. "Larry, if you're reporting facts, I don't want to hear it and my precinct captain doesn't want to hear it. In fact, no one in the DC police department wants to hear it!" A pause. "If you want to gossip, however, go right ahead."

Putnam's reaction only confirmed Sikes' suspicions about what he'd seen. Washington was being evacuated, all right; only the big shots didn't know it. He had to laugh a little about that. "All right, I'll gossip; I won't report." Right then his pager buzzed. "Uh oh, station's calling."

Putnam watched as Sikes reached into the van and retrieved a cell phone. "Larry." He saw Sikes' jaw drop. "Chris, would you repeat that?"

Sikes listened again and shook his head. "I agree; people are unbelievable. Okay, give me five minutes and I'll be ready to go live." Sikes shut off the phone and turned to Putnam. "Sorry, gotta roll on down to the White House. But you'll probably be joining me there soon as things get out of hand enough."

"What's going on?"

"Since ET's not answering his phone, someone had the idea of rigging lights to a helicopter to attempt some kind of visual communication," Sikes replied as he stepped into the van.

"So? Sounds like a good idea to me."

"Protesters are starting to show up because the government's using military helicopters. The world may be ending and...." Sikes didn't finish but roared off down Pennsylvania Avenue.

George Christenson had never wanted to run for Congress. He was quite happy running his used-car dealership on the outskirts of Boise, Idaho. "Let Ed worry about that foolishness," he declared, referring to his older brother, whenever the subject was mentioned.

But then the local congressman had died, at a time of maximum inconvenience to both Ed Christenson and the leading Democratic candidate. Everyone had agreed that it made no sense to run an expensive campaign that would only have to be redone the next year. So, a little familial armtwisting later, George was facing off in a special election against the seventy-year-old father of the other likely nominee in next spring's primaries.

Except for the way local papers insisted on talking about the arrangement as if two Mafia families had broken bread with each other, it wasn't too bad, George thought as his plane landed at National Airport the morning of July first. *Sure is a pretty city, with all that greenery. And at least there are no skyscrapers blocking out the sun,* he thought.

With Congress in recess, I'll poke around the Hill a couple of days, settle on a *place to live, that sort of thing. Maybe I can even catch a late plane out of here after the fireworks. I still got a lot of packing to do back home.* The lanky Idahoan twisted in his seat. *A piece of cake.*

Thirty-odd hours later, Christenson was walking away from the White House, disgusted by the protesters. *They're worse than those kooks back home that think Oklahoma City was an ATF plot,* he thought as he waited for an old Plymouth with New York plates to complete its turn onto Constitution Avenue.

A block further on, he caught up with a young black man who was trudging along with two hefty-looking plastic bags slung over his shoulders. Christenson brushed aside his mind's attempt to leap to the obvious conclusions, proving he was not yet a politician. *Besides,* he thought, *either one would be wrong: the kid's too clean-cut to be homeless and especially tonight no drug dealer is going to be hauling his stock around with him in plain view this close to the White House.*

"Hey, son, haven't you left evacuating a little late?" Christenson asked.

"So have you," the young man retorted in a friendly manner. He stopped, swung the bags down and held out his hand. "I'm Grover Wilson."

"I'm George Christenson and, believe it or not, the most junior member of Congress."

Convincing Wilson was easier than George thought it would be. Having his brand-new ID along helped, though. The young man wasn't even startled when George revealed that—due to a major scheduling mixup—he was bunking in his new office.

"Don't worry too much about what the folks back home think about it," counseled Wilson. "You're not the first Congressman to do it. I've heard of one or two that just didn't want the expense of a second residence here."

Christenson nodded. "Yeah, that's what the House manager told me. It's something that's allowed, but not encouraged. So I figured, what the hell, why move out? I'm only going to be here a couple of days anyway."

Wilson bent to pick up the bags, looked at Christenson and said, "Here, you'd better take on of these Lansburgh Lunches."

Puzzled, Christenson accepted the offer. As the two crossed back onto Pennsylvania Avenue, he asked "What's a Lansburgh Lunch?"

As she drove the overloaded van along the west side of the Mall, Lacy Benton thanked Allah that she was at the wheel. *If one of the others was, we'd have smashed up for sure!*

Stimson and Billiel, crammed into the only unpacked area of the van at the end of a very long day, were not on civil speaking terms. Stimson had not helped matters by promising to leave when "this van is packed, my word of honor" and then taking ninety minutes to do so.

"Madame Secretary, " Billiel icily remarked, "with the skills you've shown today, you should have chosen a career in the moving and storage industry,. instead of geology."

Stimson, equally frigid in tone, suggested, "Lacy, would you turn on the radio? Perhaps some easy-listening music will soothe Mr. Billiel's savage temper."

The theory was never proven, as they caught the horrified end of a news broadcast. "...Oh my God! The helicopters have been destroyed! Blasted right out of the sky!"

Lacy hit the brakes as a stunned Billiel mumbled, "I never really thought...."

He was interrupted by an announcer who was trying very hard to do his job. "This just in: The White House says an attack is imminent! Repeat, an attack is Imminent! Anyone in the listening area has approximately twenty minutes to..."

Benton twisted in her seat. "Where to?"

"Smithsonian's the nearest station," suggested the Secretary.

"Only if you cut across the Mall," Billiel pointed out, in control of himself again. "We'd rip out the van's undercarriage if we tried. Archives is our best bet now!"

"We're halfway there," Benton replied.

Christenson and Wilson were passing the National Theater as Wilson finished his explanation. "So when Mr. Kim's nephew picked him up, he was surprised but told me to carry on. Just I wasn't to take anything else from the storeroom. Since I don't have any close kin to worry about, I decided to try for an even hundred bags and then take my chances in the subway. Some of the stations like Cleveland Park are real deep."

"Did you reach your goal?"

"Yup. I piled them into shopping carts and took them around to three or four of the nearer subway stations." The youth shook his head. "I thought I might have a problem dropping off a bunch of mysterious packages but nobody said a word. Truth to tell, I think they're preparing for the worst as well." He stopped and looked up, alerted by the sound of a rapidly passing helicopter.

Of all that he saw and experienced the next three days, George Christenson's most enduring memory was the glimpse of the presidential seal on the copter straining every gear on a frantic flight east.

"Forget about the deepest station, Grover. Where's the nearest?" Christenson shouted.

Wilson thought for a heartbeat. Metro Center and Federal Triangle were close, he knew, but to reach either would require twists and turns. His new acquaintance might get lost. "Archives—straight down Pennsylvania; right next to a bunch of fountains. You can't miss it!" he replied and began running.

"I don't intend to!" Christenson shouted as he followed.

By the time they reached Archives, the pair was only the advance scouts of a horde desperately seeking any possibility of safety. In his terror, Christenson was in no condition to admire the clean lines of Metrorail's station architecture. He was just pleased that it was big enough to hold two trainloads and still have room for new arrivals.

For his part, Wilson wondered why that white woman had been running up the entrance escalator, against the incoming tide. *Lady*, the teenager thought, *This is no time to be worrying about claustrophobia!*

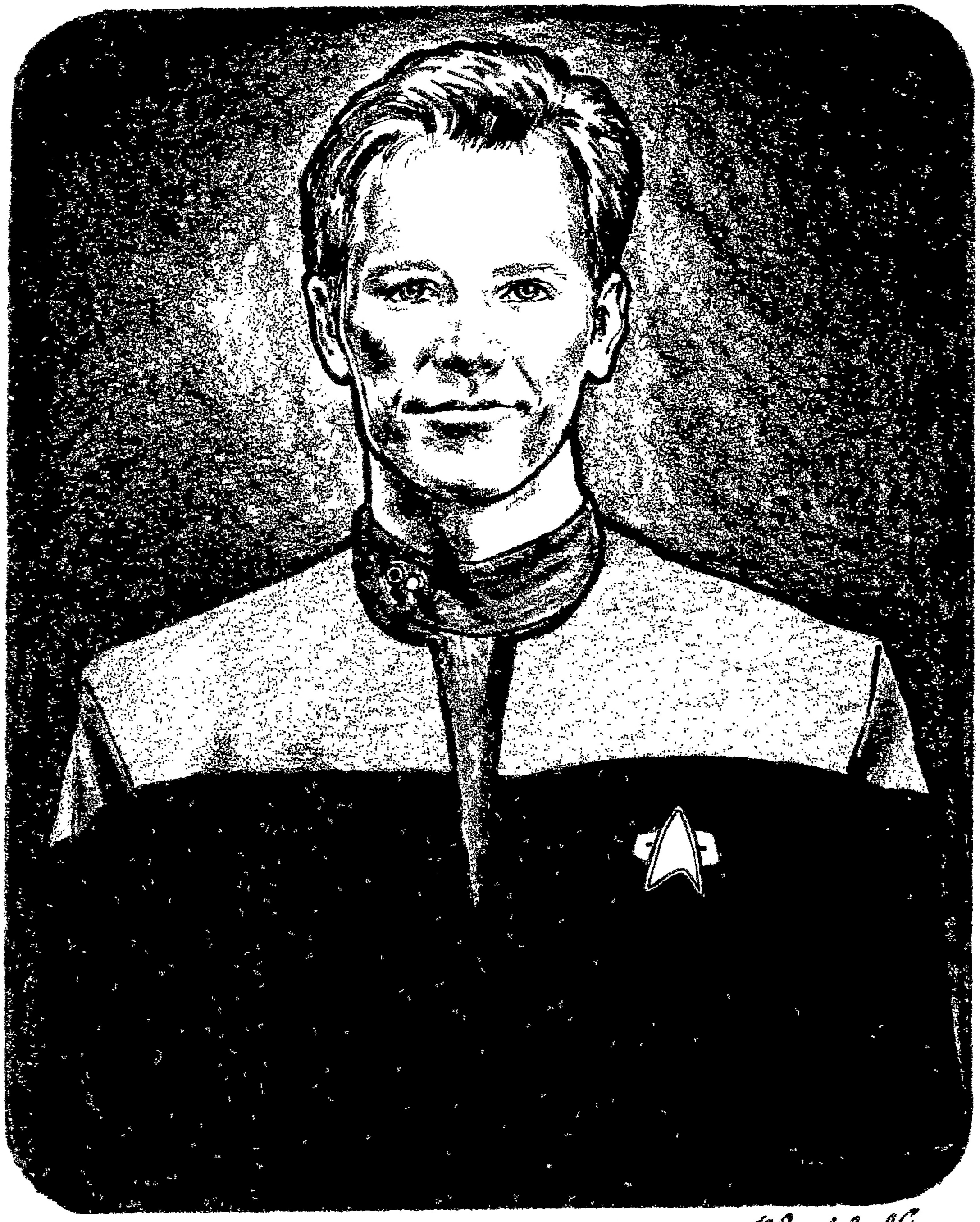
People were still coming in when there was a tremendous flash of green light, followed by an enormous cracking sound, as if a thousand jackhammers had attacked the same square of pavement at once.

The station personnel had just enough time to shout "Down! Everyone get down!" before the leading edge of the firewave hit. The uprooted farecard machines made a tremendous, banging, scraping clatter as they were pushed across the tiled mezzanine floor into the station kiosk.

A steamy smell of charring concrete filled the station as the sprinkler system fought the flames that reached hungrily toward the crowd packed onto the lower platform. Then the combined rubble of the Archives and Market Square buildings poured into the entrance way, choking off the fires. The ground was still shaking from that when the holocaust wave hit the DC power plant, cutting off lights and sprinklers.

Finally, the station became as quiet as it could be with nearly five hundred people jammed into it, each one fighting hysteria. The guards began moving about with their flashlights, reassuring those who feared the darkness was permanent.

The newest Congressman pushed himself into a sitting position. A little louder than he'd planned to, he gasped to Wilson, "That is the last favor I ever do my brother!" He rubbed the back of his neck. "If I ever make it back to Boise, I'm going to track down Ed and punch him into the next Ice Age!"


B.Eickhoff 97 ©

DEAD MAN'S BOOTS

Joyce Strohm

"Leave me alone!"

The soundproofed walls of Tom Paris's cabin absorbed his waking scream. Breath ragged and skin clammy with sweat, he shot up in bed. Although his room bore no resemblance to the Akritirian prison, dread coiled in his body as an inescapable, evil presence cackled with delight. He blocked his ears with his hands and rocked, desperate to create the fragile illusion of control.

"What do you want for the dead man's boots?"

"No," he pleaded, needing the callous voice to disappear into the shadows.

"What do you want..."

"It isn't real," Paris prayed, his heart pounding, "I'm not there."

"...for the dead man's boots?"

"I'm home. I'm safe," the trembling lieutenant insisted. "I'm safe."

"What do..."

"Computer, illumination at eighty percent," Paris croaked, wrestling the twisted covers away from his legs.

Light flooded the chamber like a burst of sanity. His terrified gaze darted from wall to wall. No lunatic lingered in the corners on this night, nor on the previous four, yet he was up and walking before it registered in his consciousness that moving targets were harder to hit. Pacing his cabin, Paris caught his breath as his panicked heart raced before finally settling into a normal rhythm.

"My name is Thomas Eugene Paris. I'm on the United Federation Starship *Voyager* under the command of Kathryn Janeway. My rank is lieutenant. I...I..." The grounding litany faltered as his haggard reflection in a passing mirror regarded him with hollow eyes.

Two weeks ago he'd been dying on a stinking prison floor with Harry standing guard. Did he look any better tonight with bruised purple crescents defining the space over his cheekbones? Above the band of his shorts, his ribs were clearly visible.

The thought of food churned his stomach, making his tongue feel unnaturally thick. In the first few days after their rescue, he hadn't been able to eat enough. The nightmares had changed all that. Now, he barely managed gagging down a few mouthfuls each meal. Paris fooled his dining companions, when he was unable to avoid them, by rearranging the items on his plate until they resembled an untidy mound.

"What do you want for the dead man's boots?"

"Shut up!" Paris faced the insidious whisper which haunted his cabin. The air rippled with anticipation as if his outburst fed an invisible tormentor, but he was alone.

"Alone." Paris tightly hugged himself against a graveyard chill and shambled towards the shower. His scalp burned where the implant had been. There was only one way to rid himself of the nagging questioner: hard work. It deflated him like a boneless carcass at the end of each shift so that he fell asleep before curling into a fetal ball of safety. Too bad he couldn't stay that way.

"What do you want for the dead man's boots?"

Paris froze. Zio's question remained the same, but it was spoken in a different voice. Shaking, he turned. His bleak eyes widened as they saw his father's frowning image in the mirror.

"What do you..." it began.

"Go away!" Paris grabbed the nearest object, a bonsai tree in a heavy pot, and flung it at the reflection. The world shattered. Mocking, insane laughter echoed in his mind.

Doubled over, his hands pressed hard against his ears, Paris waited in mute wretchedness for the end. Defeat snagged his breath as resignation squeezed his chest. His tormentor had taught him one thing: resistance was futile. Long moments dragged by before he realized there was nothing but blessed quiet. Trapped air drained out of him with a heavy sigh.

Strength followed. Paris sank to the floor, unconsciously protecting his midsection where he'd been brutally stabbed two weeks earlier. Wheezing breath stuttered to normal. Except for the whispered hush of air slowly moving in and out of his lungs, silence reigned.

The alarm shrilled. "All right," Paris snapped after an initial jerk of fright, "I'm up." The annoying sound instantly ceased.

With a ragged sigh, the sleep-deprived lieutenant pushed away from the floor, unmindful of the tiny shards of glass cutting his hands and feet. Duty called.

Leaning his head back against the shower stall while hot water drummed on his chest, Paris drifted into an exhausted stupor. Was his life, like the mirror in the next room, broken beyond repair?

I didn't like that thing anyway, Paris thought, knowing he had no time to sweep up the pieces before he reported for duty. Mirrors were nasty objects, ruthless with the truth. He bowed his head, turned off the stream of hot liquid comfort, and went to dress.

He focused on the one constant in his new life—*Voyager* remained his to fly. With a self-contemptuous quirk to his lips, Paris left his quarters and headed for the bridge. The conn seat always welcomed him as if the ship recognized his loving caress. If sleep, food, and comfort deserted him, the rush of pure exultation remained whenever he took his post. Paris forced a tight smile as he stepped into an empty turbolift. It was more than he deserved.

"So this little template controls the warp speed?"

"Don't touch that, Neelix," Chakotay warned, blocking the Talaxin's fingers from poking the conn board.

Watching unobtrusively from his post, Harry Kim winced. If the commander wasn't careful, Neelix would slingshot *Voyager* through the Delta Quadrant in a tailspin.

"But *Voyager* isn't that different from my ship," Neelix protested. "It just has more panels."

"Which is why you need to learn what they do," Chakotay answered with as much patience as he could muster.

"Think of those controls like a recipe for flying." Janeway sat forward in her command chair. "If you forget the importance of one ingredient, you'll ruin the dish."

"That never stopped him before," Ensign Carter muttered under his breath.

Kim swallowed a grin at Carter's blush when the captain's back abruptly straightened. It served the conceited ensign right. Maybe next time he'd think twice before he mouthed off. Although Neelix wouldn't have been his first choice as an alternate pilot for Voyager, Kim admitted the Talaxin had flown extremely well on their return from the Akritirian prison.

Given the carefully hidden yet still obvious stress Tom had been under lately, it was a good thing someone else was learning his station. Kim hoped the respite from responsibility would help his friend regain his appetite and his concentration. Tom had made several mistakes yesterday, easily hidden, but that couldn't continue forever. Someone was bound to notice.

"What's going on?" Paris's tired voice was neutral, almost too controlled as he stepped onto the bridge.

He looks half dead, Kim thought, noting the loose fit of his friend's uniform and the slight trembling of his hands.

Janeway's calm face hid her concern. "Neelix is learning your post, Mister Paris. We can't have too many pilots, and cross training is a good idea with our crew complement so short."

"Does this mean you want me to report to the kitchen?"

Kim sensed the panic underlying the question although Paris remained respectful, his tone acquiescent. Strangely, the image of a drowning man flitted through Kim's mind.

"No, I think we'll spare ourselves that pleasure." Janeway smiled gently. "You're to see the doctor immediately."

"What for? I'm fine, Captain," Paris lied with a cocksure grin. His hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"I didn't say you weren't," Janeway's voice was velvet steel, "but I want all personnel to have an annual exam. We're long overdue for one."

"Why do I have to go first?"

Kim knew Tom's marked exhaustion tempered the captain's response.

"Because I said so." Janeway's steady eyes gave no quarter. Like a parent with a stubborn child, she refused to allow him further slack. He was obviously ill. She'd permitted him the time to regroup on his own, but since he hadn't and wouldn't seek help, the captain had no choice. He was too valuable to lose.

"Yes, Ma'am." Defeated, Paris managed a tart nod and a ramrod back before stepping into the lift.

An instant before the door closed, Kim saw Tom sag against the wall as if he had no strength or heart to remain upright.

"Mister Kim, in my ready room," Janeway ordered.

"Yes, captain," Kim responded, following her.

She waited until they were alone. "Has he confided in you?"

Guilt warmed Kim's face with a blush. Perhaps he shouldn't have told Kes about his fears for Tom's health. It was a short trip from her mouth to Neelix and then to the captain's ears. "No," he admitted with a shake of his head, "I tried talking with him, but Tom brushed my questions aside with jokes."

"Mister Paris doesn't usually make mistakes on duty."

Under the even scrutiny of her gaze, Kim's blush deepened. She knew he'd been covering for his friend. "No, he doesn't," the young ensign said loyally, "but I thought maybe it would pass in a few days."

"Unfortunately, he looks worse today than he did yesterday. I won't have my crew ignoring their health. That could endanger us all." Janeway rubbed her forehead as if a headache lurked behind it.

A sudden idea gripped Kim's mind. "Do you think Tom is experiencing a negative reaction to the clamp? He endured it for two days longer than I did."

"Perhaps. I'll ask the doctor to run more tests to be sure." Janeway walked over to her console and sat down in front of it. "You may return to duty, Mister Kim." She waited. Obviously, her conversation with the doctor would be in private.

Although he didn't want to disobey, Kim paused. "Captain?"

"Yes?"

"Paris didn't mean to be insolent."

Something in her face softened. "I know."

A grateful smile flickered across his lips. "Thank you." He turned to leave.

"Harry." Her kind tone made him pause and turn. "You did the right thing in mentioning Tom's condition to Kes. We've all been so busy lately we failed to notice he wasn't well." Although her expression remained neutral, remorse colored the captain's tone. It didn't matter if duty kept her hopping. Janeway believed that the welfare of her crew was her first concern. She wanted them intact in body and spirit when they returned to their families.

"He didn't fall for the annual exam story." Kim's smile was wry.

Janeway's wasn't. "It was no ruse," she told him. "After the Kazons left us on that savage planet, I decided everyone's health should be regularly evaluated. Mister Paris simply reminded me of a resolution I'd already made. You'll need to schedule time with the doctor this week. I want all bridge personnel examined at the outset." She nearly chuckled at the dismay on his face. None of her crew looked forward to visiting the brusque doctor.

Kim nodded glumly. "Yes, Captain," he agreed. Returning to his station, Kim vowed that he was going to kill Paris when he recovered from whatever was ailing him. Remembering his friend's pale, drawn features, Kim's irritation abruptly faded. As long as Tom got better, he would endure a thousand trips to the ship's physician.

"Except for being underweight and overtired, I'd say you're in perfect health, Lieutenant."

"Then I can return to duty?" Paris failed to prevent the pleading note from coloring his question. The tips of his ears burned as Kes glanced away. She knew how much he hated the vulnerability of sickbay.

The balding hologram shook his head as he administered a vitamin hypospray to Paris's neck. He handed another to his patient. "Not today. I want you to go to your cabin and sleep."

Paris examined the remaining hypospray. "What's in that?"

"Merely a sedative to help you rest. I don't understand the human compulsion to stay up all hours when your body insists on slumber."

Shadows darkening his eyes to midnight, Paris smiled bitterly. "I have to maintain my reputation as the life of the party."

"That attitude might bury you young."

Paris slid off the examination table. "At least my dance card will have been full," The underlying strain in his voice flattened the joke. Ignoring the doctor's disgusted snort, Paris escaped.

"Tom?" Kes reached out to snag his arm.

Staring into her anxious face, the shell the brash lieutenant had erected as a barrier cracked.

"Get some rest. For me?" she begged. Unshed tears made her brilliant turquoise eyes gleam.

If only I could, he thought tiredly.

"I'll try," he promised and quickly left before she asked for anything else. In his present state, he was likely to tell her more than she wanted to know. Kes was a good friend. She merited more from him.

"Everyone deserves better than what I've been giving lately," Paris muttered as he roamed Voyager's corridors. No wonder Janeway had replaced him with Neelix. In his present state, he endangered his crewmates. Harry had tried to warn him yesterday. He was about to screw up his life. Again.

Remembering the young ensign's loyalty, a warmth grew in the pit of Paris's stomach. He absently scratched the back of his head as he rounded the last bend near his cabin. Who would have thought he'd find a surrogate brother when he first boarded Voyager?

Glass crunched under his boots as he entered his quarters. With each step, apprehension slowly drained the sunny feeling and replaced it with an icy knot of fear. How had he let things get so out of control? Not having any more energy to deal with the mess now than when it had first occurred, Paris shot the contents of the hypospray into his neck and crawled into bed. He pulled the covers under his chin, shivering despite the relatively high setting of the climate controls.

The drug quickly took affect. For a short time, Paris simply drifted with the disconnected sensation, grateful for the blankness behind his closed eyelids. His lips twitched as he remembered the doctor's assumption about the cause behind his lack of sleep. His reputation for carousing was well and truly established.

First Kes's, then Harry's face took shape in his mind. They didn't judge him by surface appearances. They knew the real reason he encouraged his shipmates to play with abandon. It relaxed them and forged links of friendship which helped them to work together as a team. They'd become a family.

"What do you want for the dead man's boots?"

Biting tears clogged Paris's throat as the question shattered the first real sense of composure he'd had in days. Why wouldn't Zio leave him alone? "Get out," he pleaded, hating the tremor in his voice. Hot tears wet his temples as they spilled.

"Crying is a sign of weakness..."

"You're not really there, Father," Paris said, squeezing his eyes even more tightly shut, "'cause if you were, you'd see how much I've tried to change."

"Never explain, never complain."

"I'm not the same—" Paris began.

"What do you want for the dead man's boots?" Zio's voice overrode his. It sounded right beside his ear.

His eyes snapping open, Paris looked left, expecting to see the crazed prisoner looming above him with a knife.

The cabin was empty.

"Computer," Paris demanded, sitting up despite the woozy feeling inside his head. "Scan this room and tell me who's inside."

The familiar whine chirped before the neutral voice answered, "Thomas Eugene Paris."

"Search again. This time allow for any unusual lifesigns or energy readings." He waited.

"The only occupant of this cabin is Thomas Eugene Paris."

"What do you want for the dead man's boots?" the voice came again, mocking the computer's verdict.

As it had during those final moments in the Akritirian prison, an acute sense of loss cocooned him. He was no more than a carcass whose only value lay in his clothing. Boots were worth more than his soul.

Suddenly, the back of his scalp itched fiercely. Raking it with his fingernails, Paris didn't care that the sting was accompanied by the sticky warmth of blood. The growing irritation had to stop.

"I'm going crazy," he whispered. Spoken aloud, the idea expanded in the room, scaring him.

"Is that right?" Paris asked the now mute Zio, "Am I as mad as you?"

Heavy silence in his quarters endorsed it.

"There's one way to find out," Paris said, staggering to his feet. He needed a holodeck and someone willing to trade their time in it for a week's worth of replicator rations. Although the tranquilizing drug weighted his steps, Paris reeled towards the door, his hand out to steady himself.

It seemed forever before he reached the holodeck. Luck graced him as he recognized the crewmate about to enter.

"B'Elanna," Paris called.

The chief engineer paused on the threshold. "Tom," she said warmly, then took a better look at him, "Why aren't you in sickbay? You look terrible."

"Doc ordered me to relax." Paris sagged against the wall, hoping she wouldn't notice the trembling which shook him. He blotted sweat from his face with one sleeve. "Finished my workout and thought I'd give the holodeck a go before bed."

Torres studied his drawn features as carefully as if they were her warp coils. "That doesn't explain why you're so pale or why..."

"I intend to bake on a Deloquian beach. Care to join me?" He affected a playful leer, unaware it came off more like a grimace.

"No, thanks. I had something else in mind, but it wasn't important. You look like you could use some sun. Go ahead. Take my time."

"Thanks. I'll make it up to you." Relief weakened Paris's knees. If she joined him, he couldn't run his new program.

"No need," Torres said with a wave of her hand. "I owe you for all the help you gave me last week with the warp experiments. Besides, I'm hungry. I think I'll get something to eat." She briefly patted his arm before moving down the corridor.

"Chew something for me," he called with as much of a flip tone as he could muster. In truth, food would hamper him now. Conditions had to be exact for this to work.

Stepping inside the holodeck, Paris waited for the door to close before he ordered, "Computer, run Paris A." As the dreary walls of the Akritirian prison shimmered into life around him, he added, "And eliminate all safety factors."

"That is not recommended..."

"Do it," Paris ordered. As the computer beeped in compliance, demented screams grew until they pressed like heavy thunder against his eardrums. Somewhere, Harry's computer-generated twin waited.

"So, boy. Do you want my protection?" Pit's cruel voice was blatant with need.

Trembling violently, Paris turned, resolved to face the demons which drove him.

Harry swallowed the last bite of Neelix's grubworm stew and stood. He walked to where the Talaxin stirred the gruel-grey mass and held out his bowl.

"You liked it?" Neelix questioned eagerly. He couldn't believe how well the day was going. First he got to fly—well, at least sit in the conn chair on Voyager's bridge—and now Harry was asking for seconds of his newest dish.

"I'm still hungry," Kim sidestepped, not wanting to admit the stew tasted worse than it sounded.

"That's wonderful," Neelix beamed, ladling another healthy dollop into the ensign's bowl. "Thank you, Harry. You've been so helpful in trying my new recipes this last week. Not everyone is so accommodating."

"For some reason, I can't seem to get full."

"Well, you've come to the right place," Neelix assured his current guinea pig. "I'll feed you any time."

"Thanks." Kim returned to his table.

"That looks disgusting," Torres said, frowning at the creatures writhing in the mixture.

"It is," Harry replied around a mouthful, "but it's better than nothing."

"I'll take nothing," she grimaced as she sat across from him.

Neelix placed a glass of tea before her. "It was the captain's idea."

"It was?" Somehow, Torres couldn't imagine Janeway preferring this fare.

"When we were stranded by the Kazons, she showed us how tasty these creatures were." Neelix smiled and rushed off to serve another crewmember.

With an eloquent shudder, Torres watched Kim eat. "I don't want to hear another word about Klingon cooking," she told him.

Scraping the sides of his bowl with his spoon, Kim promised, "You won't." Under his dark thatch of hair, a frown wrinkled his brow. "I thought you were scheduled for the holodeck?"

"I was. Tom asked if he could take my turn." She leaned forward, "He looked terrible so I told him to go ahead. Has he seen the doctor?"

Kim nodded. "The captain made him report there at the beginning of the shift."

"He must be all right then if he wasn't in sickbay."

"Unless he didn't go."

"Tom wouldn't disobey a direct order, would he?"

"A few days ago, no. Right now, I'm not so sure." Kim paused and studied her face a moment. "He isn't himself," he finally admitted, as if confessing some sin.

"His eyes were a bit unfocused, almost desperate," Torres mused.

"There's Kes. She'll know if Tom saw the Doc." Kim waved the blond over.

Kes smiled at Neelix before she joined them. "B'Elanna. Harry."

"Did Tom report to sickbay?" Kim asked.

"Of course," Kes said. "The doctor sent him to rest in his cabin."

Kim and Torres exchanged glances.

"Didn't he go?" A worry line appeared between Kes's eyebrows.

"Maybe he did," Torres told her, "but I just left him by a holodeck."

"But he should be half asleep from the medicine the doctor prescribed."

"He seemed tired," Torres confirmed, "but he was also determined to use the holodeck."

"Maybe Tom felt like sleeping at Sandrene's," Kim suggested.

"I didn't know anyone ever slept there." Kes's innocent expression amused her companions despite their worry.

"They usually don't," Torres said dryly, remembering the wanton computer-generated females who peopled the imaginary bar.

"I think I'll check it out," Kim decided, pushing away from the table. His stomach rumbled.

Neelix hurried over. "You aren't leaving? I've made krumcaca weevil pudding for dessert."

"Save some for me," Kim directed, leaving the two women to fend for themselves.

"I'll join you." Torres caught up with him, eager to escape the culinary purgatory of Neelix's cooking.

A grin flashed across Kim's serious face. "I thought you were hungry."

She gulped. "Not after seeing the menu."

"It wasn't that bad," Kim protested.

"If you say so. I prefer to do my experimenting in engineering."

The grin on Kim's face faded as they rounded the last turn before the holodeck. He didn't need his companion to point out the one Tom was using. The middle chamber caught his eye like a spacedock accident. He keyed a sequence on the door panel. Nothing happened. "Computer, open holodeck three."

"Unable to comply," came the impersonal voice.

"That's strange." Torres quickly programmed a code into the entrance board. The portal remained shut. "Computer, why aren't you unlocking this door?"

"Current user has overridden safety commands."

"Dammit!" Torres wasted no time arguing. She quickly pried open the panel and rerouted several wires. There was a tiny spark before the doors parted.

Kim felt as if he'd been gut punched. "Computer, save and exit program," he shouted, instantly recognizing the Akritirian prison. Dreary walls faded to the familiar black and gold geometrics of an inactive holodeck. Paris's curled form was instantly visible. "Tom!" Kim cried, kneeling beside his friend and gently turning him over.

Paris moaned low in his throat as the movement generated a spasm of unbearable agony in his knifed midsection.

Torres palmed her communicator. "Medical emergency in holodeck three. Lock onto Tom Paris and beam him directly to sickbay."

"Understood."

Before the transporter shimmered the dying man away, he looked up at his companions. Tormented eyes begged them to understand the thoughts his lips refused to speak.

"Why?" Kim pleaded as his friend dissolved into beads of light.

"I'm positive the clamp isn't responsible for Mister Paris's current condition," the Doctor replied with a hint of annoyance, "He's exhibited no physical abnormality since I repaired his injuries. I believe his problem is psychological not physiological."

Staring at her heavily sedated helmsman who jerked against his restraints even in unconsciousness, Janeway's eyes burned. He'd endured and conquered so many personal demons in the last two years. If anyone had told her she'd come to respect and care for the impulsive pilot when they first met, the captain would have doubted their sanity as much as the doctor was now questioning Tom Paris's.

"He's a survivor," Janeway said. Even to her ears, the statement held more hope than conviction.

The Doctor's forehead wrinkled. "That might have been true once. However, the human mind, unlike my program, has limits of endurance. Akritiria was not the first time Mister Paris was incarcerated."

"And you believe his experience there explains his current behavior. Are you sure it isn't an after-effect of that barbaric clamp?"

"His current scans match those I took the last time he visited sickbay before the Akritirian incident." The Doctor sniffed disdainfully.

"No...you can't do that..."

Paris's anguished mutter drew Janeway's gaze to his thrashing form. She winced as the doctor hyposprayed more drugs into his neck. As Tom quieted, she blinked away sudden tears. His ready smile and quick wit had bolstered her spirit more than once. Why couldn't she erase his nightmares?

Because you're a starship captain, not Sigmund Freud, sniped her mental voice.

"What treatment do you prescribe?" she said aloud, straightening her shoulders "And how soon before *Voyager* has her best pilot back?"

"Mister Sauder's condition refreshed my memory about several psychiatric approaches, but Lieutenant Tuvok's assistance made understanding mental corridors an easier task. I would have unraveled the mystery in time but..."

"Are you suggesting Tuvok initiate a mind meld with Tom to learn the reason behind this unrest?"

Piqued because the captain had interrupted his lecture, the Doctor nodded curtly. "That would be the most immediate solution."

Janeway studied her inert crewman's features. They twisted in anguish despite his drugged stupor. "I'll ask Tuvok, but the decision must be his. Mind melds are intimate experiences. I will not force either to do one."

"If we don't, you must expect Mister Paris's recovery to take longer. In fact, he may have to be confined in the brig for his own safety if a cure proves elusive."

The captain's anxious eyes widened. Would he recover if she locked him in another prison even to save his life?

"Until we discover what sent him into that holodeck, Mister Paris is a suicide risk."

Janeway's heart did a sickening flip-flop. The often-brash lieutenant didn't seem the type to kill himself. Yet, wasn't that what someone always believed about a person who took his own life? "I'll speak to Tuvok, but I also want you to run the tests again."

"My diagnostics are not faulty." The Doctor's sputter was filled with haughty pride.

"I'm not suggesting they are," Janeway held up a placating hand, "but we need to be sure that physical trauma isn't causing this."

"Yes, captain." The Doctor's brusque tone made it clear he was not pleased by her command.

Janeway held his gaze for an instant before Paris's moan snagged her attention. Awakening in restraints was not helping him. "Keep me informed," she said, heading out of sickbay before the foreign feeling of utter helplessness rent her heart completely.

"I won't." Paris's voice was raspy, weak, but inflexible as Klingon pride. His wild eyes darted to the faces of the three people flanking him. Strangely, the countenance of each kept shifting, superimposing more frightening images of others from his faraway and not so distant past: those who had considered him worthless.

"That is an illogical attitude." Tuvok folded his arms across his chest as he studied the younger man. Had they removed the restraints too soon? Paris's tired demeanor contrasted with the flickering wildness in his gaze.

"I don't need your disgusting sympathy or your help." Despite the tremors which racked him, the distraught lieutenant pushed himself to a sitting position and glared at the Vulcan looming above the biobed. For an instant, Pit's leer replaced the security officer's calm expression. Paris averted his face.

"There's no shame in admitting you need help," Janeway calmly said before Tuvok could speak. "Everyone does from time to time."

Scorn twisted Paris's pale features as her last few words came in his father's voice. "Does that go for you too? What about never complaining and never explaining?"

She blinked at the blatant anger which only confirmed his out-of-control state. "I'm no different from you, Tom." Her quiet voice held no censure.

"That's not true," he denied, standing to face his unofficial jury. Suddenly, all of the accusations he'd endured throughout his life crested. Surging rage lent Paris the brief strength to remain upright, but he leaned against the supporting bed while the room spun. A thousand fire ants cremated rational thought inside his skull. Short of breath despite a repaired lung and midsection, long moments passed before he could elaborate. "You never killed anyone who depended on you and disgraced your family name in the process." He paused, wheezing for air.

"That's true but—" the captain began.

"And you face your problems head on."

"That doesn't mean I haven't had help in getting them resolved."

"No one's saying you're crazy." Paris stopped as his mind briefly cleared. His chest spasmed from the effort to speak. Although his body was mended, it still needed a recovery period.

"We aren't claiming you are," Janeway soothed, "but you've obviously been upset since your return from the Akritirian prison."

"That has nothing to do with it," Paris growled, shoving through the wall Janeway, Tuvok and the Doctor had made in front of him. His fury and their surprise lent him the ability to increase the distance between them. Paris turned, his eyes shifting from one frowning face to another. The walls inched closer, and the sickbay air seemed as dense as water. His lungs burned.

Tuvok took a step forward.

"Get away from me," Paris screamed, seeing Zio's triumphant sneer superimposed over the Vulcan's visage. He grabbed a scanner and threw it at the psychopath.

"We aren't going to hurt you," Janeway promised, stilling Tuvok with an upraised hand.

"Liar," Tom snapped, hurling several hyposprays at the doctor, who winced.

A computer whirred as the holographic physician made himself intangible. When a retinal scanner flew through his stomach, a pleased look flashed across his features before a stern one replaced it. "Mister Paris, this tantrum will undo some of my finest work," he scolded.

"Murderer. You can't fool me again, Zio," Paris ranted, his eyes glittering as he grabbed a surgical laser. His arm came up, aiming for the captain.

Tuvok's phaser stunned the pilot before he could complete the motion. Paris crumpled.

Janeway was instantly beside her fallen crewmember. She brushed disheveled hair away from his forehead. Her shoulders slumped as he flinched, even in unconsciousness.

Solid once again, the Doctor crossed to her side and ran a scanner over his patient. "Mister Paris is uninjured."

"Captain?" Tuvok's neutral voice managed to carry the weight of suggestion.

A sigh escaped Janeway. She nodded sadly as she straightened. Touching her communicator, the captain reluctantly ordered, "Transporter room."

"Aye, captain."

"Beam Mister Paris to the brig."

There was a slight hesitation before the unaware pilot shimmered out of sight.

Janeway tucked away a lock of hair which had fled her confining hairdo. "In his present state, a mind meld with Mister Paris is too dangerous."

"I concur, but I am willing to do it if you deem it best." Tuvok's calm voice held reluctance. It would be a mental rape if he broke through the barriers Paris had erected around his memories.

A grateful smile flickered across Janeway's mouth at Tuvok's loyalty. "No," she decided, "There must be another way to learn what's fueling Tom's distress. We need to find it before he descends further into this madness." Grief knotted her throat. Would awakening in another cell send him hurtling into the void?

"I believe he may have provided us with a means."

"How, Tuvok?" Janeway's bleak eyes brightened with hope. If Paris could see into her heart, he'd realize how she depended on her crewmates to work through the problems which faced them all.

"The Akritirian holodeck program," Tuvok explained, "It is logical to assume that experience lies at the root of his unrest. By viewing the program with me, Mister Kim might be able to pinpoint the seed of Mister Paris's anxiety."

"That could cause the ensign mental anguish," the Doctor warned.

Janeway considered. "I believe he'll be willing to help Tom," she said after a moment, "as would most of the members of this crew." She touched her comm badge. "Mister Kim, meet Mister Tuvok in front of holodeck three."

"Aye, Captain." The young man's voice contained both worry and fear.

"If there are any anomalies," Tuvok said, "I will report them immediately." He followed the captain out of sickbay.

"Be sure to record them without disturbing Paris's original program. At some point, he may need to see the difference." As they parted, Janeway hoped Harry's mind would not react negatively to reviewing the hell he and Paris had endured. Although her resolute steps carried her towards the bridge, Janeway's mind reached out to the brig where a trustworthy man needed her to find a life preserver for his sanity.

Harry Kim wasn't sure if it was Neelix's rhubarb quiche or the thought of being in the Akritirian holodeck program which made the acidic bile rise in his throat. As he watched his holographic self tell Tom to close his eyes amidst the insane cries of the damned, he shut his own and swallowed convulsively. Guilt filled him. Paris had begged him to leave; some part of him wished he had. Maybe then, he wouldn't have struck his friend, nearly killing him.

"Computer, freeze program."

At the sound of Tuvok's tranquil voice, Kim's eyes opened. "I'm all right," he assured the Vulcan. "We can go ahead. Everything is like I remember, at least during the time I spent with Tom. I don't know how true the beginning part is with Pit."

Although he hadn't felt it then, Kim realized how lucky he'd been to have his friend stake possession of him when he'd first landed at the bottom of the chute. Tom hadn't been so fortunate in the two days he'd been there prior to Harry's appearance. It had taken everything the pilot had to prevent being claimed by Pit and his gang. Only Paris's natural ability to adapt quickly in bad situations saved him from the degradation of ownership and all it entailed.

Tuvok watched him evenly, dispassionately, before ordering, "Computer, continue program."

He tried to match the Vulcan's neutral expression, but Kim couldn't suppress a flinch when he grabbed the pipe away from Paris and struck him once. Zio appeared.

"That's not right," he said, before his voice failed.

"Freeze program." Tuvok waited.

"I hit him more," Kim managed.

"Computer, repeat the last action," Tuvok commanded, "and multiply the level of Mister Kim's agitation."

A whining beep sounded before the program ran again.

"More," Kim croaked.

The scene grew increasingly violent.

Pale and shaking, the young ensign nodded. "That's it." He forced himself to watch as his other self realized the horror of his actions and fled to Zio. Nauseated and sick at heart, Kim stoically waited for the program to run its course. As it ended, he hung his head, unable to look at his companion.

"Do you wish to review it again for differences?"

"No," Kim breathed, "It's right, down to every last disgusting detail."

A firm hand settled on his shoulder. "I realize your emotions prevent you from seeing your actions in any logical manner, but you acted correctly, given the circumstances."

Kim met the steady gaze of the security officer. "I nearly killed my best friend."

"You saved his life despite the clamp affecting your reason. Mister Paris was fortunate. Without you, he might have died."

"He almost did."

"But he did not because of you."

"Right." Harry's flat voice made it clear he wasn't going to discuss it further.

"Are you sure this new program matches Mister Paris's recollections, and there isn't something both of you want to forget?"

"Except where I almost beat him to death, it did." A new thought struck Kim. "Do you think I'm the cause of Tom's breakdown?"

"That seems highly unlikely. There must be something else which Mister Paris didn't program into his reenactment, perhaps in the time before you arrived. His outburst in sickbay dealt with his unwillingness to accept help. He didn't fear we were going to strike him."

Nodding, Kim asked quietly, "Are we through?"

"Unless there is something else you wish to add."

"Thanks." Before Tuvok could offer more logical consolation, Kim fled. Only one person could lighten his burden. In the few minutes it took for him to make his way to the brig, the troubled ensign's mind reran the holodeck program. Although all the details seemed right, the dark memories wouldn't let go.

"Come to stare at the animal?" Icy disdain filled Paris's voice.

"Howya doin', buddy?"

"How do you think?"

Stepping as close to the force field as he could, Kim replied, "Lousy." He waited for his friend's reaction. There was none. The other man jerked his head to look beside him as if something just beyond his peripheral vision waited to grab him.

"Can I get you anything?" Kim pitched his voice low, unthreatening. It had seemed to get through to Tom once before in the Akritirian prison.

Slowly, Paris's deranged gaze focused on him. "Yeah."

Hope warmed Kim's heart even though his companion's tone remained as caustic as acid.

"Your heart, you son of a bitch," Paris screamed, throwing himself against the force field. An electric charge hurled him back against the bulkhead.

"Tom!" Kim's fist crashed into the wall beside the door as the other man slumped, dazed. Suffocating impotence choked Kim's ability to speak as he waited.

Paris looked up, his normally clear eyes clouded by insanity. "Go back to Zio, traitor. You're a dead man if I see you again."

"Tom, no," Kim pleaded.

If Paris heard, he was oblivious. He jerked his head as though an invisible person stood over him. "Stay away from me," he cried, shielding his head with his arms. Curling into a fetal position, he shuddered as if vicious blows struck his body.

"I did this to you," Kim whispered, stunned to see his worst fear confirmed, "It was me." Unable to watch his friend's torment any longer, the younger man fled.

Janeway leaned forward. "You discovered very little difference?"

"Paris's program matches Mister Kim's memories. It is unclear if the events prior to his arrival are accurate."

"We may never learn if they are. I agree with your reluctance to mind meld with Paris. That might create new problems for him and you."

"I am willing..."

"Yes, my friend," Janeway smiled slightly, "I know."

"Mister Kim's emotional state has become highly unstable since viewing the Akritirian program."

"This isn't the first time I've wished for a ship's counselor aboard."

"I believe he would be reluctant to take advantage of such a service."

Janeway shook her head. "There's nothing wrong with seeking help if you need it. Someone has obviously convinced both Tom and Harry otherwise." Her eyes narrowed, "I think I understand where Paris's aversion comes from."

"Captain?"

"I served with his father on the *Al-Batani*." Her wry tone said plainly the assignment had not always been pleasant.

"He has an unblemished reputation."

"Yes," Janeway nodded, "for adherence to duty and dedication to Starfleet. Still, I found him a cold man. I accompanied him when he gave a lecture at Starfleet Academy. He reprimanded a student who offered to guide him to the hall where he was scheduled to give a speech. The Admiral claimed someone who couldn't find their way on campus had no business charting unexplored space."

"That seems logical."

"On the face of it. Yet, I wondered if he'd ever realized how refusal to accept any kind of assistance offends and hurts those who benefit from being needed."

"This might explain Mister Paris's antipathy to the mind meld."

"His father would certainly want him to solve this problem by himself." Janeway folded her arms across her chest. "I'm not sure how to convince Tom differently." The door chimed. "Come," she called.

Kim entered.

"What's wrong?" Janeway asked, seeing the fear shadowing his bloodshot eyes.

"I'm responsible for Paris's condition," Kim blurted as the door swished closed behind him.

"How did you arrive at that conclusion?" Tuvok asked calmly.

"He's convinced I'm helping Zio," Kim said, brushing an impatient hand through his hair, "Tom acts as if someone's hitting him, but there's no one else in the cell." His tone dropped to a hoarse whisper, "He thinks it's me."

Janeway firmly held his glance. "If that were true, Harry, he would have exhibited antipathy towards you much earlier than this."

Hope briefly lit Kim's puppy soft eyes before they grew bleak again. "It was all a facade. Now that Tom is sick, he can't hide his true feelings."

"I disagree," Tuvok stated, "Mister Paris remained your friend after the prison incident. In fact, from what I observed of his Akritirian program, he was touched and honored by your protection of him."

"I let him down. He got stabbed because of me."

"Harry," Janeway said with all the authority of her position, "Both you and Tom must realize that no one else would have reacted differently had they experienced that horrible place. You were hurt, starving, and badly outnumbered. The clamp almost extinguished your sanity. It's a miracle you were both alive when we got there."

"But Tom—" Kim began.

"Doesn't blame you." The captain stopped, blinked. "He blames himself." The sudden insight made sense.

"That's ridiculous. He got wounded defending me. What could he have done differently?" Kim shook his head.

"He recreated that environment to find out." Janeway's voice grew stronger with the strength of her conviction.

"That is a logical assumption, given his father's attitude," Tuvok agreed, "Perhaps I should return to the holodeck with Mister Paris to show him that he could not change..."

"No, Tuvok," Janeway interrupted, "It has to be me."

Disapproval marked the Vulcan's calm face. "I believe that to be unwise. In his current state, he could injure you."

"Then we'll have the doctor sedate him," Janeway insisted, "but I must be the one."

"Why?" Kim's voice held a mixture of hope and confusion.

"Because like his father, I represent authority. If Tom sees that I wouldn't have fared any better than he did, he might be willing to cut himself some slack."

"I must insist on accompanying you." Tuvok's voice was firm.

Janeway shook her head. "No, I have someone else in mind." She frowned slightly, but her voice was gentle. "Mister Kim, could you bare to watch the Akritirian program again?"

Kim's face paled. "If it'll help Tom."

"We need to save all versions of it, but I want to add a third one with myself in Tom's place. Can you factor in his age so that my hologram will react as consistently as possible with his years of training?"

"No problem," Kim said.

Seeing the dread shadowing his eyes, she laid a supportive hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, Harry. Neither you or Tom will be alone in that prison again."

Paris felt weighted down as though he were trudging through thick mud. A vague recollection of fighting with the doctor's ghost before something hissed into his neck floated across his thoughts. It didn't matter. At least the terrible shape-shifting faces had stopped. Harry appeared as himself, if a little more haggard than usual, and the captain...well, she was as determined as ever. All in all, their presence comforted him even if his back teeth and mind felt like they were wrapped in wool. "A night out at Sandrenes," he sighed as the holodeck doors opened. "Exactly what I need."

"Tom," Harry warned.

"I remember," Paris answered softly with a ghost of a smile, "First a layover on Akritiria, then France. Traveling coach sucks." He held up the restraints on his bruised wrists. "Are these really necessary? None of the other tourists are wearing them this time of year." It didn't occur to him to wonder how the bruises had come about. His entire body felt like it had been trampled by a rampaging herd of Botallian elephants.

"You're right. How careless of me to forget." Janeway purposefully matched her tone to his light one as she removed them. Tuvok had insisted that the manacles were needed. If the doctor's drug was counterbalanced by a surge of adrenaline, the cuffs would provide them with a measure of protection. Yet they isolated the pilot further. He didn't need that now.

"The price of a reputation." Paris stood between the captain and Kim. A shudder rippled down the muscles of his sweaty back as the holodeck door closed with a pneumatic swish. He winced as the captain briefly touched his hand.

"Tom?"

"I'm ready," he told her, despite the tightening muscles in his jaw. "On with the show." Even a week ago, the admiration in her eyes would have warmed him, but growing apprehension killed all positive feelings.

"Computer, run Janeway Seven-B," the captain said. Without conscious thought, she stepped closer to Paris. Kim mirrored her actions so that the trembling man was safely ensconced between them.

"Keep away from me," the holographic Janeway screamed, kicking out at her circling attackers.

Seeing a tousled younger version of his commander instead of himself, Paris blinked in surprise. "I...I don't understand," he said. Confusion deepened the lines in his exhausted face.

"Halt program," Janeway ordered. As the simulation froze, she explained, "The only way I could come close to understanding what you endured in that hellhole was to put myself in your place."

"But your hologram is so much less..." Paris fumbled for the right word.

"Experienced?" Janeway supplied easily, "It wouldn't be fair unless I had your training. You didn't have a captain's background to temper your actions. We eliminated those factors in my own program. While I didn't endure what you're going to see, my hologram will make it possible for me to simulate how I might have reacted."

"But I'm not you," Paris said. He mentally winced at his bitter tone. No matter how hard he tried, he would never be good enough.

"No," Janeway agreed quietly, "which is why you'll see that my hologram fared less well than you actually did." Without giving him a chance to protest, she ordered, "Computer, resume program."

Acid rose in Paris's throat as he watched Pit's gang surround and overpower the enraged Janeway. The rape which followed wasn't as bad as some he'd seen during his time in such places, but his eyes burned with angry tears. To watch a person he respected and cared for endure such humiliating pain tightened the knot in his throat to the choking point.

'What do you want for the dead man's boots?' Zio's taunt echoed in Paris's thoughts.

A shudder racked the weary pilot as he

closed his eyes to deny the vicious mental whisper; hot tears spilled down his cheeks. He jerked as warm fingers caught his own, providing an anchor. The captain. "I'm fine," he managed, opening his eyes to the still running program.

"I know," she reassured him and stoically turned her gaze back to the visual playing around them. Despite brave determination in the face of brutal trauma, the holographic woman couldn't find the means to bolster Kim's flagging sanity. The ensign was left with no mental discipline to focus on. Starfleet protocol failed where menu planning had not.

Glancing at Janeway, Paris recognized the self-flagellatory grimace which briefly twisted her face. Harry's mirrored it. This program couldn't help him. It was only hurting them. "Stop, please." Rigidly holding himself still despite Janeway's strong fingers on his arm, Paris tried to keep the desperation from his voice. If he lost himself again, he wasn't sure he'd ever find his way back, drugs or no drugs.

"If we can bear it, Mister Paris," Janeway said in a no-nonsense tone, "then so can you."

Underneath the ringing authority, Paris heard her concern. That caring braced him as he watched Janeway get stabbed while defending a nearly out of control Harry.

"It's only a hologram," Kim whispered hoarsely.

Ignoring the inadequacy swamping him, Paris reached out for his friend's shoulder and held on. Strength flowed from the captain on his right through him into Harry. Kim's face calmed, and his over-bright eyes glowed with gratitude.

Paris nodded and looked forward once more. "No," he breathed as he saw. Kim lying down beside a fevered Janeway. The hands holding him tightened.

"Don't leave me. I don't want to die here," the holographic woman begged.

"I didn't say that," Paris denied quickly, with a shake of his head.

Kim's hand squeezed his. "Yes, you did, Tom. I forgot this part. You asked me to stay."

"I didn't," Paris contradicted, pulling away from both of them, "I told you to leave me."

"Yes, you did earlier, but at this point, you made me promise that I wouldn't leave you behind."

"Is that true?" Janeway questioned calmly.

`What do you want for the dead man's boots?' Zio gloated.

"I don't know," Paris said desperately. He moved further away from his two companions.

"Halt, program," Janeway ordered. Black and gold geometrics replaced dreary Akritirian walls. "Tom?"

"I couldn't have." Tears blurred Paris's vision as his heart threatened to burst from his chest. "That would have been asking Harry to die."

"But you asked me to stay," Kim insisted softly. "You didn't want to be left behind."

Hugging his middle, Paris shook his head, "You're wrong."

"Think, Tom," Janeway erased the mental space between them and gripped his upper arms, "Go back to that time in your mind. You were sick from the clamp, starving, dying."

"Oh, God," Paris sank to the floor, Janeway's arms providing support. "I did. I asked you to die for me." The tears which he rigidly held in check choked him.

Kim was instantly there. "No, Tom," he said gently, "You asked me to help you live."

Paris shook his head. "I was dying, Harry," he managed despite a strangling sob, "and knew if I did, you'd be alone with those murderers. You had a better chance without me..."

"I had no chance without you," Kim contradicted. He gestured to the now blank holodeck. "The captain's program was true. If you hadn't kept my mind on food and getting us out of there, I would have lost it long before I did."

"You made survival possible," Janeway said, running a soothing hand down her pilot's trembling back.

The motherly touch unmanned Paris. The shadowy tide of emotion crested, breaking away his barriers. Too tired to fight any more, Paris let bitter tears flow.

"No one would have wanted to stay," Janeway comforted, continuing her caring caress. "Not Harry, not me, not your father."

With her touch providing the only link beyond a sea of dark sorrow and self-loathing, Paris wept as he hadn't allowed himself to since he was a little boy. He cried for things he hadn't prevented and those he'd caused through carelessness.

"Let it go, Tom," Kim urged, supporting him with a strong arm around his slumped shoulders.

Grief stretched into infinity as bitterness emptied from the depths of the young pilot's soul. A lifetime seemed to pass before Paris became aware of his friend's concerned hands. Spent beyond anything he could remember, he sighed and lifted his bowed head. His eyes burned from the lack of moisture. Even if Zio asked for his boots, Paris didn't care. The thought made his lips twitch.

Janeway smiled gently at him. "Do you think you can sleep now?"

"Yes," Paris breathed. For an hour, a week, or a year.

She held Kim's gaze. "I trust you'll see him to his quarters."

"Aye, captain," Kim agreed, helping his friend stand.

They had taken only two steps towards the door before the exhausted lieutenant paused. "Wait," he begged.

His companions questioned him with concerned eyes.

"Computer, erase program Paris A," he said as firmly as he could. Akritiria belonged in the past.

A whistling beep confirmed the deletion.

Janeway nodded her agreement to his brave move and the pride in her gaze kindled a spark of life in his bloodshot eyes.

Paris tried to find some way to tell her how much her caring meant. His fogged brain could only produce one word. "Thanks," he managed. Her encouraging smile said it was enough before Harry helped him begin the seemingly endless walk back to his quarters.

"Do you want something hot to drink?" Kim asked as his friend settled beneath a quilted blanket.

"No." The hoarse refusal was nearly inarticulate with exhaustion, but the shame in Paris's voice spoke volumes.

Pulling a chair next to the bed, Harry sat. "Computer, illumination to forty percent."

"Wait," Tom protested, propping himself up although he looked beyond the capacity for movement.

In the bright room, Kim could see the pulsing vein in the other man's neck. "You need to rest." Once more, he pitched his tone low, unthreatening.

Remembering the last time, Paris couldn't hold his gaze. He studied the blanket covering him as if it had turned to Orion moonstones.

"Don't worry," Harry patted him comfortingly, "I'll stay 'til you're asleep. I'll even clean up the glass." He gestured to the broken mirror.

"I'm sorry," Paris mumbled.

"It's okay. You'd do the same for me."

"No, I wouldn't. I almost got you killed. Or did you forget?"

"You know what I remember?" Kim replied, "Someone pushing me out of harm's way, then taking a knife in the gut on my behalf."

"I didn't..."

"You did," Kim maintained, "You stayed clear of Pit and his gang for two days before I got there. If I hadn't slowed you down, you might never have been hurt at all."

Disgust lined Paris's face. "That's nothing. I learned how to deal with his kind back home in prison. If you show them no fear and give as good as you get, scum retreat."

"I was your weak link," Harry insisted.

"You were and are my friend. I don't deserve your loyalty. Sooner or later, I'll screw up and get you killed."

"I'll take my chances if you will. Shall we keep score of how many times we save each other?"

A weary grin twisted Paris's lips. "Nah. I'd rather have a running tally on the Delaney sisters."

Kim smirked. "I'm ahead there."

"In your dreams," Paris snorted. A shadow doused the tired twinkle in his eyes.

"What?" Kim's quiet, patient manner didn't intrude as much as it invited.

"I'm afraid to sleep," the exhausted man admitted.

"Close your eyes," Kim encouraged, "I'm not going anywhere." He covered his friend's icy hand with his warm one. "I'll keep the demons away, Tom."

"But they're inside my head." Paris's vulnerable eyes expressed both fear and shame. The next few weeks would not be easy.

"Don't worry about that now. One minute at a time. Maybe Tuvok'll teach you a way to tell those bastard thoughts to shut up."

"Sounds nice," Paris sighed, closing his eyes. His breathing slowed, evened out.

Knowing that his friend lay on the edge of sleep, Kim held still, gazing at his hand covering Tom's. Paris gave so much more than he asked in return. It didn't matter if it was absolution for the way others mistreated him or his life. He was willing to forfeit anything for his crewmates and friends.

"Pleasant dreams," Kim said in a soft voice. His companion muttered something before snoring quietly. It didn't matter. If Zio or the nightmares intruded again, Harry would keep vigil and chase them away. It was the least he could do for a man who was his best friend and brother.

Closing his eyes, the young ensign drifted in a sea of memories. He was full at last, despite not having eaten anything during the last fourteen hours. Strange how being needed filled him where food hadn't. Lost with his crewmates in the Delta Quadrant, Kim felt at peace for the first time since Voyager's long odyssey had begun.

ALEXA

Jennifer Shipp

Thanks to my beta readers Meg Wittenmyer and Debbi Okoniewski.

"Once Upon A Time..."

He'd found another one.

Methos sighed, running his hands lightly along Alexa's hair, smoothing it as she rested against his chest. Her face was nuzzled against his neck, her hand resting lightly on his chest, one leg flung casually over his. She looked utterly content, as content as Methos himself felt.

Another snuggler. He didn't know what it was about him that always drew the snugglers. He didn't mind—and if he let himself be truthful, he enjoyed it. Having a warm body pressed tightly against your own, the closeness...what wasn't to like? It felt warm and safe, and if there was one thing he wanted Alexa to feel, it was safe.

"Adam," she sighed, shifting herself even closer to him as she drifted in and out of sleep.

Methos closed his eyes, leaning his cheek against her hair. "Yes?" he murmured.

"Tell me another story," she pleaded in hushed tones.

Methos couldn't help but smile. He had been telling her his life, a little every night, masking it in fairy tales. It helped Alexa fall asleep, and it gave his soul some peace. "All right; what do you want to hear about tonight? Pick any time in history," he reminded her, though she knew his rule. He would tell her absolutely anything, as long as it was a real time in history.

She thought a minute, then decided, "Babylon. Tell me about the Tower of Babel."

Settling back against the headboard, Methos launched into a vivid description of the Tower, the Gardens, and the people. He made her giggle at his jokes about Nebuchadnezzar II, then sigh as he described the death of Alexander the Great. Before long, she drifted to sleep, nestled in his arms.

His eyes were drawn to the mirror across from the hotel bed, and the image of the two of them together. Despite all their time spent in the sun, neither had darkened. Alexa looked paler than he, if that could be believed. He watched as his fingers absently traced her jaw, unable to see their fine trembling as they brushed along her sharp cheekbones. He felt his heart catch in his chest, the weight of her illness settling firmly on his shoulders. She tired easily now, and he was doing everything in his power to make things easier on her, going so far as to alter their schedule, mostly without her knowledge. Instead of hopping from country to country as he initially planned, now they were taking long stretches through countries by train, so as to see as much of one place as possible.

Thinking back over the past few months, Methos was suddenly filled with a sense of urgency. Alexa still had so much to see of the world. They had lingered five weeks in Egypt, where she marveled at the Pyramids and the Valley of the Kings. Possibly too long. He didn't want to admit what his eyes were showing him in the mirror: Alexa was growing weaker. He feared she wouldn't be strong enough to travel much more. He only hoped he had enough time to tell her his whole life, a night at a time.

He wrapped his arms tighter around her thin frame, a sense of calmness settling over him. Memories of the start of their journey replaced his current thoughts, and he smiled, remembering the first few days of their "New World Tour."

Methos decided to show Alexa more of nature's wonders than the man-made tourist attractions. He made exceptions for the really big ones, like Fort Knox, the Statue of Liberty, and Big Ed's All-Nite Taco Stand. She was more than content with that, absorbing the beauty of the land around her.

They were a few days out of Seacouver, driving down the Pacific Coast Highway. The sun was setting as they pulled over beside the seashore. Methos offered a hand to help Alexa out of the van. They removed their shoes and socks, then began walking barefoot along the beach. Alexa laughed as they dodged the incoming tide, careful of the debris the water washed up. As the sun started to slip into the water, they stood side by side, watching it. Suddenly, her hand snaked into his, her slender fingers curling around his own. His hand tightened around hers, and he felt his heart fill.

That was the first sign of intimacy she had shown him since they left Seacouver. But the simple act of reaching out and taking his hand had won over his heart. It had been a long time since he'd let anyone close to him; opened himself to trust someone again. She broke down those barriers with her smile, and a few choice barbs tossed his way at their first meeting.

The sun finished its path into the ocean and they returned to the van, the warm feeling still with them.

Driving on for a bit more, Methos finally pulled into a nice-looking motel for the night. Alexa waited in the car while Methos got their customary two rooms, then he walked her to her door. They paused outside her room, the familiar awkwardness returning. Despite her trust in him to accompany her across the country, and possibly the world, she was still wary of him.

Alexa stared at Methos, begging him with her eyes to understand. "Adam, you're sweet, and I do like you, but..."

"I wouldn't dream of imposing," he assured her with a sweeping bow. Methos captured one of her delicate hands in his and touched it to his lips. "Good night, fair maiden. Would you do me the honor of dining with me when the sun makes its majestic appearance at the dawn?"

His flowery speech caused her to laugh. "You're crazy, Adam Pierson. But I will meet you for breakfast," she promised, squeezing his hand as a sort of pact.

"Til then." He made another sweeping bow, one arm tucked behind his back, then went back to his own room, the smile never completely leaving his face.

Their journey took them down the west coast, across the desert and the Grand Canyon, then upwards to Colorado and the Rockies. Going from arid desert to snow-capped mountains in two days delighted Alexa, bringing color to her cheeks. The weight of her illness was lifting, and she was enjoying herself. Her smile came more readily as the days wore on, her laughter louder and brighter. And, to Methos, she grew even more beautiful. As Methos spent more time with her, he noticed something different about her, but couldn't quite tell what it was...

They wandered from the lodge, taking in the peaceful quiet of the surrounding forest. The new-fallen snow crunched under their feet; the scent of pine was thick in the air.

Suddenly, Alexa flung her arms wide and dropped backwards into the deep snow, laughing. "Come on, Adam! Make a snow angel!" She waved her arms and legs, forming the wings and robe.

Smothering his smile, Methos took a deep breath and dropped backwards into the deep pile, sinking immediately. "It's freezing!" he exclaimed, laughing anyway.

"It's snow; it's supposed to be freezing!" Alexa chided him good-naturedly, rolling over on top of him.

"Ooof," he gasped, wrapping his arms around her.

She playfully punched him in his coat-covered chest. "I don't weigh that much," she joked lightly.

Methos immediately sobered, brushing her snow-filled hair back off of her face. He hadn't intend to remind her of her illness, especially not when she was having such a good time. "I'm sorry," he apologized immediately, instinctively brushing her lips softly with his own. His eyes widened as he realized what he just did, and he abruptly changed the subject. "It's too cold out here. How about going to the lodge for some hot cocoa? It'll warm us up."

She pushed all her weight on him, refusing to let him up. "I can think of other things to warm us up, Adam," she teased, grinning at his astonished expression.

"Alexa!" he cried, trying to keep his scandalized face intact, but he dissolved into giggles about the same time she did.

Floundering, still laughing, she got herself to her feet, then offered her hand for Methos. He clutched it, feeling electricity run up his arm, and his laughter died away. "Come on, let's go inside," he murmured, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

They continued across America, stopping in various cities to see the sights. Every few states, Alexa would send a postcard back to *Joe's*, letting her ex-boss and friend know that they were all right. For Methos, she was more than a breath of fresh air into his stale world. He truly marveled at her enthusiasm. She felt everything passionately, and made him feel it with her. Alexa made each city come alive for him, but one city would forever remain dear to his heart: Chicago. For in a suburb of Chicago, another unspoken barrier between them fell. They shared one room.

Methos leaned against the front desk, waiting for the night clerk. He yawned; so much for making it an early night. Alexa wanted to see a baseball game, and it went into extra...somethings...she tried to explain it to him, but he was hopeless. He had no interest in the organized sports of today. He could remember when it was a matter of pride in one's own country, or one's own bravery. The bell above the door tinkled, and he turned, his eyes lighting up as he saw Alexa.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked as she walked over to him, wrapping her arm around his waist—fitting against him perfectly.

"No, nothing's wrong. I was just wondering what was taking you so long." Alexa spared a glance around the lobby, then turned her gaze back to Adam. "No help tonight?"

"Very little," Methos grumbled. His arm tightened around her. "Did you want to try the other hotel?"

Alexa shook her head. "No. I want this one. Here he is," she murmured as the clerk returned, his face flushed.

"I am so sorry," the middle-aged man apologized. "Now, how can I help you?"

"We'd like two rooms, please," Methos answered promptly, snapping his credit card onto the countertop.

"We'd like one room, please. Double beds," Alexa's soft voice corrected Methos' statement. Her hand rested on top of Methos', and she looked up at him with a smile in her eyes. "Adam, you're wasting money by getting two rooms. We can share."

"I...are you sure?" Methos asked, feeling himself grow warm.

"I'm sure," she assured him, blinding him with her smile.

"Sir?" the clerk asked, though he was smiling.

Methos hadn't been able to keep from returning the smile. "You heard the lady. One room, double beds."

Alexa shifted in Methos' arms, dragging him from his memories. He sighed, carefully pulling the comforter up over both of them. He knew he wasn't going to get any sleep. He hadn't slept much, preferring to stay awake and watch Alexa sleep. Their time together blurred before him, and he wondered just how long it had really been since they shad tuffed the van full of hopes and took off across America. Weeks? Months? It felt like years, but at the same time, mere minutes. With her, each second was precious, at the same time an eternity and fleeting.

Roanoke, Virginia. Methos smiled, remembering. The last barrier between them was broken in Roanoke.

Methos pulled into the hotel, and again, Alexa waited in the car while he got their room. But as they took their traditional walk from the van to the room, she slipped her hand into his. After they sorted out their luggage, she locked the door and turned to face him.

There was something different about her stance as she looked at him. Her eyes sparkled, teasing with some knowledge that Methos did not have. As she moved toward him, he noticed her walk was even different; slower, swingier, and if he didn't know better, seductive. She stopped in front of him, resting her hands lightly on his chest. His breathing quickened at her touch, his eyes growing a bit wider as he felt the heat she radiated.

Her eyes searched his face, as one hand came up to trace his jaw. Her touch was light, fingertips just brushing his skin, feeling the rough stubble of a days' growth of beard. Whispering, "Adam, stay with me tonight," she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him lightly.

"What?" he croaked, staring at her, trying to regain his composure.

Her amused smile cut right through him. She tilted her head to the side, blowing lightly in his ear. "I don't think your hearing is bad," she murmured. Then she leaned in closer, squinting as she looked into his eyes. "And your eyesight seems normal."

"Well, yes, but..." Methos stammered, feeling as if the wind been knocked out of him.

"But what?" Her clear eyes held his, assuring him, while at the same time, frightening him.

"Alexa," he breathed, his gut churning. "Alexa, I don't want to hurt you."

She placed her hands on his shoulders, fixing him with her serious gaze. "You could never hurt me. You couldn't do anything to me that I haven't already done to myself."

His eyes narrowed as he frowned in concentration. "No, not true."

She pulled her head back a bit. "What?"

His expression softened as he stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "You've never allowed yourself to be loved, have you? You've kept people at a distance, not letting them care about you too much. To spare them pain. Am I close?" he asked softly.

Her breath caught; he could feel the heat of her skin under his hand. Color filled her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled with unshed tears as she regarded him. "Too close," she murmured under her breath. Louder, she added, "No, I haven't let anyone get that close to me in a long time. But with you, I feel I can. Why is that? What makes you so special?"

"I don't know," Methos answered honestly. "Don't you know?"

"I just might," she answered him steadily, moving closer. "But can you love me, Adam Pierson?"

Methos swallowed hard. "Oh, I can," he whispered, bending down to kiss her softly, his lips barely brushing hers. "I do," he murmured softly. He pulled back, the concern back in his eyes. "Are you sure? Do you trust me?"

"Yes." She kissed him quickly. "And yes," she breathed, bringing his head down and kissing him firmly, her fingers threading through his short hair.

From that time on, they shared one hotel room and one double bed. Methos again wondered if he was hurting her more than he was helping her. Taking her away from the life she known; from her friends in Seacouver, from Joe. Giving her this life, the one she thought she could never have...only for it to be taken from her in a few short months. Each place they went to, while neither said anything, it was in the backs of their minds; she would not be able to return for a visit. Once they were through a city, it was behind them, a memory. Methos wasn't sure if that was good for her, either. But the sheer joy that lit her face at each new city, each new experience, was answer enough. He had made the right decision. Wherever they went, whatever they did, Alexa would be happy. He swore it to himself, and to her.

When they reached New York, he took her to the JFK ticket counter, asking where she would like to go next.

She thought for a minute, giving his question her full concentration, then lifted her sparkling eyes. "Egypt," she stated firmly. "And I want a story for every ruin we visit."

He laughed; little did she know he probably did have a story for every ruin. But he obliged, and they touched down in Cairo, where they were greeted by blistering heat.

"Wow," she breathed, trying to take in as much of the foreign culture as possible in her first five minutes on the ancient soil.

"Let's get past Customs, then you can wow all you want." He nudged her with his carry-on.

Alexa glared back at him, and he smiled charmingly at her. Her glare dissolved into that smile again, the one that he felt in his gut. "All right." Her smile turned nervous as the came up on the Customs office, and she shot him frequent glances for reassurance.

Methos leaned down and whispered to her, "Don't worry; I speak a bit of Arabic," as their turn came. She stared at him in shock as he spoke rapidly to the Customs officer. The officer nodded, then turned to her, smiling.

"Enjoy Egypt, Ms. Bond," he said in a thick accent, bowing slightly. "And you, Mr. Pierson."

"Th-thank you," she stammered, bewildered. Adam once again spoke to the officer, then they were through Customs and out on the street, blinking in the harsh light.

"You said you spoke a bit of Arabic," she accused mildly. "That was more than a bit."

"Don't you like surprises?" he teased gently, then caught the look on her face. "No, you don't. All right. I wasn't kidding when I said I spoke Russian, and of course Arabic. I'm a connoisseur of languages."

"How many languages do you speak?" she asked in a slightly awed voice.

Methos closed his eyes, debating how many to tell her without raising suspicion; wondering how many would be too many for her to accept. "Ten," he finally tossed out, searching her face. It must have been acceptable, because the accusatory light left her eyes.

"Ten? Which ones?" she asked as they waited for an unoccupied taxi.

He thought fast. "English, of course. The first two I mentioned, Greek, a bit of Chinese, French, Spanish, Italian, German and...Portuguese." He paused, grinning sheepishly. "I lied about speaking Swahili. I hope you can forgive me."

The look of awe returned to her eyes. "You really have traveled a lot."

"All my life," he answered softly.

"That must get lonely," she mused.

Methos inhaled sharply. Alexa never ceased to amaze him. There was a depth to her that startled him; he guessed he had the same affect on her. That thought caused him to smile. Not many people got to him this badly. But, Alexa wasn't just anyone. "Yes, it does," he admitted softly. His arm curled around her shoulder, drawing her close. "But I meet people along the way to make it easier," he whispered in her ear, kissing the lobe.

A shiver went through her then, her arms snaking around his waist as her head rested against his shoulder.

It was the same shoulder that she leaned against now, in a hotel room just inside Geneva's city limits. Methos held her as she slept, a delicate woman now frail as she slipped further out of his grasp. She had an appointment at the local hospital in the morning. Methos took each new diagnosis stoically, though inside his heart ached. Less and less time, each and every time they stepped foot inside a hospital. If he had dreaded them before, now he loathed the sight of even a mere hospital sign.

They were scheduled to depart Geneva for Helsinki in two days. He hated to think about it, but she was beginning to look too frail to make these long train journeys. Flying had been ruled out by the last doctor, in Berlin. Methos sighed. Berlin had depressed her too much, and, he had to admit, it left him with bad memories as well. He had to leave her in Berlin, to help MacLeod with his Dark Quickening. Calling Joe, then Rachael, then flying to La Havre, then chasing MacLeod over half of France...

Methos' disciplined mind chose another path at random, a self-defense mechanism he had developed long ago. Never dwell on the past; you couldn't change it, only accept it. His mind bounced from thought to thought, finally picturing Alexa on the shores of Santorini; remembering how the Mediterranean matched the color of her eyes. He had noticed it the first time she had set foot on the beach. They'd stayed on the beach, all day, just soaking up the sun and the laughter of those around them.

Methos closed his eyes, letting the warm memories surround him again...

"Why are you doing this?" she asked him, staring out over the Mediterranean.

His hand faltered on her leg, where he was absently stroking her skin. "Doing what?"

"This," and Alexa waved to the ocean before them. "Taking me on a whirlwind tour of the world. You didn't have to."

Methos replied seriously, "I wanted to. I thought I made that clear before we left."

"I know." She turned to him then, the warm breeze tossing her hair about her shoulders carelessly. "But what are you getting out of it? All the money you've spent on me..."

He cupped her chin and kissed her softly. "I inherited a fortune when my father died; don't worry about the money," he lied smoothly. His expression grew serious as he answered her next question. "As for what I'm getting out of this, I'm enjoying the company of a lovely lady, who has a great sense of humor and a wonderful laugh." He brushed the hair away from her face, letting his fingers caress her cheek. His voice dropped to a desperate whisper as he answered her last question. "And as for why I'm doing it...I love you."

Color bloomed on her cheeks instantly, and she had to look away from the intensity in his eyes. "But you hardly know me."

"I know enough. I know you like history. I know you love buttery popcorn and funny movies. I know you love taking walks along the beach. I know you love to get into heated debates about jazz musicians." He chuckled softly. "And I know you really, really hate opera."

She briefly smiled, then became serious as she absorbed his words. "Then how can you stay with me, knowing it will end soon?" she asked quietly.

The gentlest brush of his fingers under her chin turned her head until she faced him. "How can I not?"

Shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand, she studied his face. Her small frown was slowly replaced by a look of wonder. She finally shook her head. "I give up. Adam, you're impossible!"

"Part of my charm," he quipped instinctively, covering his raw emotions. "And I *will stay with you, and be here for you, for as* long as you need me."

"I need you," she whispered, falling against his shoulder. Together, they watched the sun set in a myriad of reddish hues, from the deepest crimson to the lightest pink, streaked across the sky.

Methos sighed, turning his head toward the window. It looked like the sun just cracked the horizon; it was dawn. Alexa shifted again, and he felt the heat of her body against his. He closed his eyes and reveled in it for a minute, then he frowned. She was too hot. Carefully resting a hand on her forehead, he felt the heat radiating from her.

"Alexa," he whispered, giving her a gentle shake. "Alexa, honey, wake up."

She mumbled, wiping the back of her hand across her face. "Hot," she murmured.

Methos could feel her labored breathing against his body and felt a cold chill settle over his heart. Slipping out of bed, he dressed quickly. Leaning over Alexa, he carefully dressed her, then carried her to the car. After she was securely belted in, he slid behind the steering wheel and took off as fast as he dared, rushing to the hospital.

"Not yet, not yet," Methos whispered as he paced the hospital corridor, waiting for word on Alexa. She still too much to see, too much to experience. She couldn't be taken from him yet...

"Mr. Pierson?" a thickly-accented voice called.

Methos whirled to face the doctor. "Yes?"

"I'm afraid it is not good. Her body is just too weak. Her heart is failing her. She does not have much time."

"There is nothing you can do?" Methos asked, unconsciously slipping into French.

The doctor showed mild surprise, which was quickly overshadowed by his sadness. "No, I am afraid not. There is nothing anyone can do for her now."

Methos nodded, thanking the doctor for his time and help. "Can I see her?"

"Of course. This way." Methos followed the doctor to her room, resting his hand on the door. The coldness of the wood permeated his soul, and he shivered. Gathering himself, he pushed open the door and stepped inside.

He stayed with her until she fell asleep, then stole quietly out into the hall. He returned to the hotel and called Joe Dawson, updating him on Alexa's condition.

"So she doesn't have much time?" Joe's voice was soft, barely heard over the noise of the bar.

"No, she doesn't," Methos replied, keeping a tight rein on his emotions. "Did you want to see her?" he asked, knowing Joe cared for as if she were his daughter.

"I—yes, I would. But I can't..."

"Joe," Methos interrupted him, "I'll have a ticket waiting for you at the airport. We're in Geneva." He gave Joe some flight information and the name of the hospital Alexa was at. He hung up, then dropped his head into his hands. Nothing. There was nothing anyone could do for her.

Methos refused to accept that. There were always choices; there was always another way.

He lay back on the bed, letting his mind wander. He marveled at her strength and courage. He wondered briefly if he had ever faced death as bravely as she, but shoved the thought aside. His life didn't matter; Alexa's did. And he was determined to find a way to save her. His mind sifted through the past few months, his years with the Watchers...he bolted upright, reaching for the phone. Dialing with precision, he asked for a flight to Paris, non-stop, as soon as possible. He was on a plane in two hours, heading to Watcher Headquarters.

Empty handed and with a heavy heart, Methos returned to Geneva. He had gone after the Methuselah Stone, the only thing on the face of the planet that could have saved Alexa, and he had failed. On the plane ride back, all he could see were the pieces of the crystal falling into the river. Moving swiftly with the current, being carried out to the sea, away from him. He had wanted to give Alexa immortality, and had nearly lost his own life in the process. He had done all he could, and it wasn't enough. Hailing a cab, he gave instructions to the driver to take him to the hospital. He would try to explain, and ask for her forgiveness that he couldn't save her.

Methos walked down the too-familiar hospital corridor with his head down, nearly running right into Joe, who was just coming out of Alexa's room.

"Whoa, Adam," Joe said softly, dragging the Immortal out of his introspection.

"Joe? Sorry, didn't see you there." There was a haunted look in Methos' eyes, one that Joe recognized. Failure. "How is she?" he dared to ask, his voice catching in his throat.

Joe closed his eyes, shaking his head slowly. Placing a hand on Methos' shoulder, he offered the Immortal what comfort he could. "She's nearly gone, Adam. It's time to say good-bye."

Methos nodded once, taking a deep breath. He covered Joe's hand with his own, returning the comfort. Then he released the mortal, pushing the door open. He stepped lightly into the darkened hospital room, swallowing hard. She looked tiny in the bed, her skin as white as the sheets, and he very nearly backed out of the room. A fine tremor wracked his body, but he forced himself forward, ignoring the equipment surrounding his beloved. The sounds assaulted his senses though; the hissing of the respirator, the erratic beeps of the monitors, the steady hum of life-support.

"Alexa, I'm back," he whispered, unfolding the cane-chair he had brought along. Regular chairs were too big, and this was small and light enough, so that if anything happened, he could move it in an instant. He perched carefully on the narrow seat, then took Alexa's small, cold left hand in his. "I'm sorry I was away so long; I went looking for something." He bowed his head, silently asking for her forgiveness that he couldn't bring it back to her. The Methuselah Stone was lost to the Seine, and Alexa was lost to him.

At the light pressure on his hand, he looked up. Alexa was staring at him, or more accurately, her gaze was fixed in his direction. She was too weak to even focus.

Taking a ragged breath, he forced himself to ask, "Would you like to hear a story?"

Her fingers lightly brushed along his palm, sending a jolt of emotion through his Quickening. Rarely did a mortal do that to him, but she did. She always did. "All right, then. Once upon a time there was this prince. Not an overly handsome fellow, but passable by today's standards. One day, as he was riding back to his kingdom, he came across this beautiful woman, a princess. She was elegant and graceful, yet she didn't give him the time of day. The prince tried to strike up conversation, but the princess turned her back on him."

Alexa's grip slackened, but Methos continued, tears falling from his eyes.

"Little did he realize the princess was just frightened of him, for she had never seen him before in her kingdom. He introduced himself as Methos, and offered his hand to her. She took it, and he kissed it gallantly. The princess was won over, and he escorted her back to her kingdom and her father, the king, where he asked for her hand in marriage. The king refused, saying the prince was not worthy of his daughter's hand. The prince then challenged the rightful suitor to a duel. Naturally, the prince won, in a brilliant display of swordsmanship and courage. The king was won over, and gave his daughter's hand to the prince. They were married within the week, and when the old king died, they became rulers over both the lands, and lived happily ever after."

Methos remembered to breathe. *Slow, in and out, take your time.* Control. Precision. When he himself under what he considered enough control, he rose from the chair, folding it neatly. He leaned it against the far wall, then turned back to face her. He leaned over and took her hand, kissing her knuckles lightly.

"What the princess never knew, was that she had softened the prince's heart. He had been a cold man, shut off from the world, before he saw her. He didn't think the cost of love was great enough anymore. But the princess proved him wrong, and Methos was forever grateful to her." Methos couldn't see; his eyes were blurred by tears. He leaned down and kissed her one last time.

"Sleep well, fair Alexa," he whispered. He turned and headed for the door, brushing past the nurse who had come when the monitors went off. She had heard the last of his story, and didn't want to interrupt him, instead, remaining in the hallway, out of sight. There was nothing she could have done for Alexa, anyway. She wiped at an errant tear, turned off the equipment, and went to inform the other gentleman who was there to visit the young woman.

Dedicated in loving memory of Selma Woerndle and Bill Sanders.

SALVATION

Kathy Kipper

A cool misty rain was falling, the kind that could chill you to the bone. It clouded the sky, made the roads wet and slick and made people miserable if caught without a coat. But those who had to be out in it were used to such weather and paid little heed to it on this day.

One such group was Truck 26 of Acme Trash Haulers. The three men went about their work as usual, talking among themselves as they transferred garbage from bins to the truck. It was a dirty stinky job that paid fairly well and was always going to have good job security, for no matter how much was recycled there would always be trash to be collected.

Truck 26 came to an alleyway, where they were to collect garbage from a series of businesses that included a fast food restaurant, dry cleaners and two used clothing stores. Mel, the older of the workers, motioned the truck towards the first bin then tripped and fell backwards with a yelp of surprise.

The driver of the truck leaned out his window to glare at Mel as the third man, Clyde, wandered over to where Mel sat on the ground. "What the..." Clyde's face lost all color and he stumbled back a step.

Men, seeing his friend's expression of horror turned and stared at the ground for the briefest of instants before leaping to his feet with a cry. "C...ccc...call the cops!" he shouted at the driver. "Call the cops!"

Yellow plastic ribbon cordoned off the alleyway from both ends; uniformed and plain clothes officers searched for evidence of the crime. Every piece of dirt and trash was examined for it might hold the key to who had committed it. In the middle of it all were two men, one in a suit and the other in jeans and a windbreaker jacket. The latter, Frank Black, was kneeling beside the body as the former, Lt. Robert Bletcher, looked on. They had gone through this ritual just two days ago with another young child. It was the kind of a case that any sane adult dreaded, and the weather wasn't making it any easier.

A hand came to rest on the child's body as Black opened his mind to any evidence he might find, and was assaulted by such an influx that he gasped at its impact. Through the eyes of the killer...KILLERS...he saw the young boy struggling against his bonds. Terror...sheer stark terror was coming from the boy and hatred...pure unadulterated hate, was coming from the killer. The combination made Black pull back a fraction and close his eyes as he tried to regain his emotional balance.

"Well, Frank?" asked Bletcher. Black didn't answer; he didn't move. He simply stared at the small body. "Frank?"

No reply was forthcoming. While he, Frank Black, had seen a lot of horror in his job with the FBI, it was the murder of children that hit him the hardest. They had lived so short of a time, had lost so much that he could not block them from his mind or soul. And when they had been so terrorized as this child had, as the child the other day had been terrorized, it made it doubly worse to bear.

This one was particularly difficult to deal with, for the boy looked to be the same age as his daughter Jordan. It was obvious that the boy had been executed even without the images, for during his death his wrists had been bound together as had his ankles and the areas sported red marks let by the tape. As for the cause of death, there was a stab wound in his chest that had penetrated his heart. This death was identical to the previous one of two days ago.

"Frank," repeated a concerned Bletcher.

"He didn't have a chance," was the only reply.

"What do you mean?" demanded the lieutenant. "Did you see something or not?"

"I saw the murder," Black murmured, "nothing more. There was more than one murderer."

"And?" pressed Bletcher. He needed more information if he was to begin solving this case.

"That's all. There was more than one murderer." Without anything more to add, Black went to his Cherokee and drove off.

Jordan was in the front yard playing with her puppy when he drove up. Catherine was sitting on the porch, reading. When she saw her husband scoop Jordan up and hold her tight, she knew there was a problem.

Yet she said nothing about it until Jordan was in bed and he was standing in the doorway of his daughter's bedroom watching her sleep. "Frank?" A gentle tug on his arm and Catherine led him to their bedroom, where she quietly closed the door. "What happened today?"

In a whisper he replied, "Another child was murdered."

Those worse cut into Catherine for she knew how much a child's death hurt him, even if he wouldn't admit it aloud. Her arms slid around his waist and Catherine held him close. Black turned and embraced her, his face buried in her hair. At that moment both knew it was going to be a long and a very sleepless night as they struggled with all of his demons.

Victim number one was a four year old by the name of Joshua Remington. He'd been abducted from his front yard three days prior to his death. According to his mother, he'd been a typical boy who loved worms and stray animals. Witnesses of the abduction gave differing descriptions of the abductors, none of which could give the police a single solid lead. Even the description of the vehicle used was useless, for according to official records no such car existed.

Victim number two, the one they'd found yesterday, was a five year old named Terrance Somers who had been playing with friends across the street from his home when he had been abducted two days ago. Now his body lay in the morgue awaiting pick up by the mortuary. Both boys had died of a stab wound directly through the heart.

Black read the coroner's reports on the children, the knot in his gut growing larger. In both instances he'd seen a child bound and held down as they were executed, killed by people who were filled with hatred for a child. As for the field work by homicide, nothing solid was being added to the case.

Finally he closed the report and asked Bletcher, "Any other children reported missing?"

A file was taken by Bletcher from the desk. "A dozen since yesterday. Ages eighteen, sixteen, thirteen and on down to a newborn...we think there's a baby-selling ring operating in the city."

"Any four and five year olds?" The image of his Jordan flashed in Black's mind and the knot in his gut grew yet again. Who could purposely kill such innocents? Who would want to do it?

"Two five year olds are listed," Bletcher answered. "Twins. Becky and Betty Voller."

The dead children hadn't been tortured or sexually abused, that much Black knew for certain. They had been abducted and executed. "Forensics come up with anything?"

A frustrated Bletcher tossed the file back on his desk. "They were clean, as if someone had bathed them after the fact. Not so much as a hair was found."

"They had been laid on a smooth surface, a clean surface," Black said. "The killers wore gloves." No fingerprints, no cloth bits, no nothing to give their location or identification away. It was cold, calculating and ruthless by people who knew what they were doing.

Trouble by his friend's lack of attention, Bletcher asked, "Frank, are you all right?"

A detective knocked on the officer door and then poked her head inside. "Lieutenant, we've got another one."

Bletcher took the address from the officer then he and Black left for the next crime scene. This one was in an area where people too lazy to pay for garbage pickup dumped their trash. The body of a young girl was found in one of these trash piles, covered with rotting fruit peels and smelly oily rags. The officers on the scene made room for the new arrivals and Black went to stand over the dead child. Again he felt the hatred and the terror left by the murder, and he felt anger and frustration well up inside of him.

"The same?" asked Bletcher.

"Yeah," was the quiet reply. "The same. The binding of the wrists and ankles, more than one murderer and the smooth surface."

Bletcher kicked at an empty tin can and sent it sailing across the vacant lot. "We're running behind these people. We've got to catch up with them."

Black electricians tape had bound the girl's wrists and ankles and had left red irritated areas on her skin, and a hole pierced her chest and on through her heart to her back. She hadn't had a chance against her murderers. The image of Jordan superimposed itself over the girl's face and Black found himself looking down at the body of his own daughter.

"Frank, are you all right?" asked a concerned Bletcher.

"No, Bletch, I'm not." He turned and walked from the crime scene.

The next day the bodies of Becky and Betty Voller were found behind bushes in a city park, their hands and ankles bound and stab wounds through their hearts. On his knees between the girls, Black closed his eyes as he was flooded with images. He saw their executions; he felt their terror and horror. And as before he could not see where they had been killed or anything about their murderers.

"It doesn't make any sense," he told Bletcher as he rose to his feet.

"What doesn't, Frank?"

"The hate I'm feeling." Black paused, to see if he could make himself understand what he was about to say. "It's not for children in general. It's directed towards a certain child."

"If it's for a child," Bletcher repeated slowly, "why kill five?"

"Because.." Now it was coming clear for Black, and he hated what he had come up with. "Because they don't know where the child is."

With that, Bletcher caught on to the train of thought, and he felt ill. "So they keep killing until they kill that one child. How can they do that?"

Somehow Black was managing to distance himself from this latest murder, though it was quickly draining him. "Their hatred for this one child it so great it doesn't matter how many children they have to kill. They must kill the child."

"Why?" Bletcher asked after a moment's pause.

The emotional walls Black had erected collapsed and again he saw his daughter lying on the ground, a hole in her chest. He turned abruptly away, to face the police lieutenant. "I don't know." Hands in his jacket pockets, Black went to his Cherokee and drove away.

Jordan was in the living room with her puppy and she waved when he arrived home. Catherine greeted him with a kiss and knew something was wrong when he didn't return it. In a low voice she said, "Another one?"

As quietly as he could, to keep Jordan from hearing, he replied, "Two."

A ball landed at his feet and the puppy pounded on it. Picking up the dog, Black carried it over to Jordan then he and the dog were on the floor, playing with the girl as if nothing was wrong in the entire world.

Late evening had come and with it the vacating of the building. Only a few workaholics were in the offices on the lower floors. On the uppermost floor, in the exclusive office of a high priced, highly- respected advertising firm, men and women sat around an expensive oak conference table, color photos of a child before each of them.

"Are you sure?" an elderly man asked.

"I'm sure," replied a middle aged woman.

Another woman stated, "The age is right."

Those at the table nodded in agreement. "We must move," added a college student, the youngest of the group. Again there was unanimous agreement.

"We must not hurry," cautioned the elderly man. "We cannot make a mistake, or we will lose."

"We must move," murmured the teenager.

"We must," whispered one of the women.

"We must move," a raspy voice whispered as the owner, a well dressed, well respected doctor sipped her coffee. She and her colleagues were in the living room of her house. It was furnished with costly antiques and original paintings, a mansion to be envied. She held up a color photo for all to see.

"Are you sure?" asked her husband.

"Very sure," the doctor replied. "The address is on the back."

"We must move," said an older woman of the group.

"Yes," replied a young red haired woman. "We must move, and soon."

Jordan was safely tucked in her bed, a doll cradled in her arms; the dog was asleep in the kitchen near the back door. The house was dark, quiet and peaceful. Behind the closed door of their bedroom, Catherine nuzzled her husband's ear and kissed his cheek. A few whispered words had him smiling for the first time in days. A few more words had her in his arms, receiving a thorough kiss.

Then, suddenly, he was flat on his back on their bed with Catherine kneeling over him. A mischievous gleam lit her eyes as she very slowly unbuttoned his shirt and jeans. "You," she whispered, "need to forget for a while." And she began to make love to him.

A soft click was all that could be heard, then the door slowly opened. As quiet as was humanly possible a pair of black-clothed and masked figures crossed to the stairs and climbed them, pausing at the top. The door to the girl's room was slightly ajar and from where they stood they could see she was asleep. A cloth laced with chloroform was drawn out and they approached her bed. After a moment's struggle she was in a drugged sleep and one carried her to the waiting car while the second went to the kitchen. Using an air pistol, the figure shot the puppy in the rear and, once the animal was in a drugged sleep, picked up the puppy and left the house. The sleeping child and dog were placed in the rear of the van; The two kidnappers got in and drove down the dark street.

Neither of the adults cared that a body lay a block from the house, a bullet lodged in the man's brain. All they cared about was the fact that they had reached the child first, and now she was in their custody.

"Jordan, time to get up." Catherine heard no reply and pushed the bedroom door open. "Jordan?"

The bed's covers were thrown back Jordan's favorite doll lay on the floor. Other than that, the room was empty. After checking the other rooms of the house, Catherine went to the basement where her husband was working. "Frank!" He looked up from the computer. "Jordan's gone!"

After a moment's hesitation for the words to sink in, Black ran up the basement stairs two at a time. He checked his daughter's bedroom then checked outside to see if Jordan might have wandered off during the night. When he found no indication of his daughter or the dog, he called to his wife. "Catherine, call the police." Terrified, she went to make the call.

Bletcher led the team that responded and he took their statements as his people began their search of the house and its grounds. He then heard Catherine ask, "Will we get her back?"

In a voice that reflected her fear, Bletcher replied, "I don't know."

An arm around her waist, Black guided Catherine outside, where they sat on the steps of the front porch. Away from the police Catherine allowed herself to cry, her arms tight around her husband. Black held her as close as he could, his own eyes filling with unshed tears. His daughter was gone, taken from him in the middle of the night. The child he and Catherine weren't supposed to have was gone, probably in the hands of the child killers.

Bletcher stood in the doorway, watching the couple and feeling completely helpless. If this followed the established pattern, they'd find the girl's body in a day or so. As for clues, with their luck there would be none.

The investigation continued on for more than an hour. The doors of the house and the girl's bedroom were dusted for fingerprints; the locks on the back and front doors were checked for forcible entry. The ground around the house was checked for unusual footprints or other clues. And the neighbors were questioned to see if anyone might have heard or seen anything.

The answers to everything seemed to come up in the negative. The only thing that bothered Bletcher was the missing dog. In none of the previous abductions had a pet been taken even though cats and dogs were around the now dead children. Why had this pet been taken? Just for the hell of it, or perhaps because the dog was trying to attack the perpetrators. Yet if that was the case, his friend would have heard the ruckus Whatever the reason, it was an odd twist.

When everything had been checked out, Bletcher dismissed his people and sent them on their way. With a somber, sad expression he said to the couple, "I'm sorry," and he went to his car.

Black and Catherine remained on the front porch until dusk, when they decided it was time to face the too empty house. They were stopped by the arrival of FBI Agent Sherry Allsman. She spoke with them, examined the house then made her departure with only the promise of another investigation.

That night a sleepless Black wandered through the house, from room to room as if looking for an overlooked clue. At almost midnight he saw a familiar car stop across the street and a tall balding man got out.

Black went to meet Peter Watts in the quiet darkness. "Peter, have you got anything?"

"I went through the evidence," replied Watts. "Nothing to lead us to the kidnappers."

Hands shoved in his pockets, Black said, "The missing dog is new."

"True," agreed Watts, "but no one considers it worth anything."

"What about out on the street?"

With a shrug, Watts said, "Total silence. Either they're too scared to talk, or they have nothing to offer. We do have one thing, but it's slim at best."

Ready to listen to anything, Black asked, "What is that?"

"A so-called prophecy," Watts said reluctantly. No one in the Group gave it much credence, but it was something to consider. "A child alive now will save the new millennium. And there are people out there who are sick enough to want to see the end of the world. And there have been two other strings of killings exactly like this in the past month. One in Miami and one in Denver. They might be tied together."

"Kill the child," said Black, "and kill us." What a sick philosophy. But then what in this modern world wasn't somewhat sick? "And now they might be here, in Seattle. How many children did they kill in Miami and Denver?"

"Six in each city," answered Watts, and waited for Black to get his own answer from it.

"Six and six..." Black replied, and paused, feeling ill. "And Jordan makes six now. The number six-sixty-six."

Watts expression didn't change, didn't show anything he was feeling. "If they are even related. We don't know for certain that they are." And with that, the bad news was delivered and his mission was completed. A final glance at Black and Watts got in his car and drove off.

Back inside the house, Black was greeted by black silence. There was no patter of puppy feet as the dog came to greet him. There was nothing but an unearthly silence. Surrounded by that quiet, Black went to the living room and sat in his chair, his gaze fixed on the telephone. After a long moment's deliberation, he dialed a long distance number despite the fact it would be after four in the morning on the East Coast. He had nowhere else to turn, and his old friend was one last grasp of hope.

The phone rang five times before a groggy voice said, "Skinner here."

"Walt, it's Frank Black." His voice broke with inner pain as he spoke. "I need your help."

The initial terror of being kidnapped had subsided and an exhausted Jordan lay on a double bed, her eyes fixed on those who had taken her. They had brought her here to a room with brightly colored walls, a big TV, toys and games, a computer and a doll that was almost as tall as she was. And there, lying at the foot of the bed, was her dog.

A man and a woman were standing near the computer, talking to each other. "I want my Mommy," Jordan demanded tiredly. Neither person answered. "I want my Mommy!" Seeing she would get nowhere, Jordan hugged the puppy and began to cry.

A plain blue car pulled to a stop behind the red Cherokee, a well dressed couple getting out and approaching the porch where a man waited. "Frank Black?" the man asked as he showed his identification. "Special Agent Fox Mulder and this is Special Agent Dana Scully."

So, Walter Skinner had sent him the best. But then what else should he have expected from Walt but the best? He'd still been with the Bureau when Fox Mulder had joined the Special Crimes detail, and had heard good things about the man. Later, before he left the Bureau, he'd heard strange things about "Spooky" and his gut told him this was the man to help him find his daughter. Mulder wouldn't stop at conventional investigation. Mulder would push the limits until he either found Jordan alive, or dead.

"Did Walter give you a rundown?" asked Black.

Scully replied, "He did, sir, and we spoke with Agent Allsman before we came here. May we see the room?"

As Mulder followed them into the house and up the stairs, his mind ran over what he knew of Frank Black. The man had been with Special Crimes when he'd joined and soon heard from other agents in the detail that Black had a strange ability to identify with a killer. Later, he heard stranger rumors of how Black could actually get inside the killer and see what the killer saw. His own mentor had laughed at those rumors and the so-called ability, yet Frank Black had solved some of the worst cases and convicted the most heinous of killers. He doubted Scully would believe in Black's ability, but he did and hoped it could be of help.

The child's bedroom was untouched since her disappearance. The powder from print taking still remained, as did the doll on the floor beside the bed. Mulder ad Scully moved through the room, to the window where they looked out over the back yard.

"The evidence isn't here," Scully said. "Neither the police nor the FBI have turned up anything."

Mulder thought about it for a moment before saying, "I'm going to talk to Black. You talk to the wife."

Once Scully was gone, Mulder asked Black, "Did you see anything that morning?"

A shake of his head and Black said, "No."

"Not a hint of anything about what happened?" They needed a clue, any clue, to get this thing really going.

Again Black shook his head. "Only that someone carried my daughter off."

Strike two, Mulder thought. "Tell me what you saw with the other children."

Anger flared briefly in Black at the memories of the visions. "I saw them as the killer saw them. Each child was naked, their hands bound together at the wrists and their legs at the ankles. The killer was so filled with hate, as were the persons holding the children down. They used a plain icepick through the heart to kill."

"A plain icepick," Mulder repeated. "What of the room?"

A pause, then Black said, "I never saw it. The killer was fixed on the child each time."

Mulder tried yet again. "Did the killer say anything?"

Again Black paused, to be certain of his answer. "Not in any of the killings."

"What of the children?" asked Mulder. "Did they say anything?"

Yet another pause filled the room, this one as Black wrestled with the sharpness of the combined memories. "All they did was scream." A trembling hand wiped at his face as Black moved past Mulder and to the window, which he opened for some fresh air. He took in a few deep breaths. "They all screamed until they were killed."

A horrifying experience for even the hardest, most experienced agent let alone a father whose daughter was now missing. "Agent Black, we don't know that the same people took Jordan."

Turning from the window, Black said, "It fits the pattern. A child, four or five years old, is taken and no clues are left behind."

"One clue," Mulder reminded. "The missing dog."

"Coincidence?" challenged Black, "or a real clue?" He shut his eyes to try and block the memories from his mind. "I need something to hold on to, and there is nothing."

"Have you told me everything?" Mulder now challenged.

The information from Watts, Black thought, yet that was supposed to remain inside the Group. But the life of his daughter was at stake, and to him that was more important than the Group. "Some people believe that a child will save the world, and that if they kill the child they will kill the world."

A crazy theory to Mulder, and yet serial killers were all abnormal people. "So why Jordan?" Mulder asked, using the only lead to its fullest.

"Who knows," sighed Black. Moving around the bed, he picked up the fallen doll and sat on the bed, holding the doll in his lap.

Mulder watched Black for a long moment, seeing the hell the man was caught in. Frank Black had a special gift that had brought many a killer to justice, and now that gift was useless. It could not bring is daughter safely home.

Mulder went downstairs and found Scully waiting by the car. "Any luck?" he asked hopefully.

"No," Scully sighed. "You?"

"Nothing," Mulder muttered.

Leaning on the hood of the car, Scully asked, "Where do we go from here?"

Mulder opened the driver's side door. "Agent Allsman. Maybe she has an idea."

A heavy gray cloud cover brought night early, along with a cold rain. Sitting in the living room, Black stared at the far wall, oblivious to the fact the room was dark. Where was Jordan, his little miracle? Where was she, and who had her? Deep inside Black knew that Agents Mulder and Scully wouldn't find her, not unless the kidnappers made some major error. If the pattern continued, he'd find his precious daughter soon, executed like the other children.

Jordan was number six in a series of sixes. The third six in 666, the devil's spawn and the end of the world. How could his Jordan be tied to such things? How? How?!

A gentle hand rested on his shoulder and he knew it was Catherine yet he didn't even look at her. He couldn't, not tonight for he couldn't get the images of the dead children out of his mind. He couldn't keep himself from putting Jordan in their place, in their graves.

Seeing her husband so lost in himself made Catherine's pain worse. She needed him, needed to talk to him and to hold him. She needed him to hold her, to tell her their daughter would be all right even if it was a lie. Yet he sat there in that chair, separated from her by a wide gulf. It was one she would not be able to breech and so she left for bed, a bed she knew she'd be alone in this night.

Dinner had been quiet and somber with neither eating much of the food. Scully picked at her fish while Mulder covered his beef with his napkin. Both were depressed and frustrated over the kidnapping of Jordan Black. Seattle was a big city and if you didn't have a place to start, you were lost and so was the victim.

Toying with one corner of his napkin, Mulder went over the facts again. Five children had been kidnapped and killed prior to the disappearance of Jordan. None of the vehicles had since been found. None of the descriptions by the witnesses seemed to jive. At one scene there was a blonde white woman and a red-headed white man. The next time it was a black man with blond hair and a white man with black hair. It seemed as if the kidnappers were endless in their numbers, which meant that they were probably using disguises that were so good no one could tell they were disguises. And, like with Jordan's disappearance, there wasn't a single clue to be had at any of the scenes. The investigators were left with one big zero.

Scully finally broke the depressing silence. "Will we get her back alive?"

To that, Mulder gave no answer.

Her fear of them was slowly subsiding. A lot of kindness and a lot of bribes had lowered the girl's defenses, and now she was becoming more accepting of them. In other words, they were spoiling her rotten to make her a more willing prisoner. A chocolate bar here, a hamburger there and the girl was placated. As for the dog, so long as you kept it fed and took it for a walk every few hours, it seemed content.

Jordan was playing with a Barbie doll and its countless costumes. First the doll was a bride, then an ice skater and now an astronaut. It amazed her how the girl could keep playing with one doll, but so long as it kept Jordan happy, why should she complain.

And then Jordan stopped her playing and looked up, the most heart-wrenching look in her eyes. The woman felt her soul breaking for the child and wished there was another way to do this, to keep her safe. But until the rest of the dark ones were taken care of this child, this gifted child, would not be safe. They could not permit the killing to continue; they could not allow this child to be murdered. If they did, the dark ones would win the world.

In a low voice Scully told Mulder, "We have a major problem here."

Frank and Catherine Black were in the same room yet they seemed worlds apart. The disappearance of their daughter had put a high wall between the couple. It was highest around Frank Black and he was doing nothing to help lower it. Mulder and knew they had to try something or Jordan would come home -- if she ever did come home -- to a family torn apart.

Catherine got up and left the living room, Scully trailing after her. Mulder took up the now vacant chair. "When my sister was abducted I went through hell. Without my mother, I might have totally lost it." A moment later Scully returned and the agents departed.

Mulder's words had the hoped-for effect on Black, who was now realizing how he'd shut out his wife. He needed Catherine and that was all there was to it, so he went in search of her and found her in the kitchen, trying to put together a sandwich. When a piece of bread plopped on the floor, butter side down, she kicked at it and slapped at the meat on the counter. Before she could make more of a mess, he took hold of her hands and drew her to him. Wrapped in each other's arms, they simply held each other and tried to draw strength from each other. In that embrace, Catherine dropped all of her defenses and cried. As her tears fell onto his shoulder, Black felt tears slipping down his cheeks, and he tightened his hold on his wife even more.

It had been a busy morning, what with taking the dog for a nice long walk, playing several hands of Old Maid and Crazy Eight and Go Fish with Jordan. That was followed by making the world's largest chocolate ice cream sundae that consisted of half a gallon of vanilla ice cream, an entire bottle of chocolate syrup, a can of whipped cream and a can of nuts. Jordan ate her fair share, the puppy had a bowl minus the chocolate, and she put the rest in the freezer for later desserts.

Worn out by all the activity and her stomach filled by the big bowl of sweets, Jordan curled up on the floor with the dog sleeping beside her. The woman watched them. It was a scene that tugged at her heart like no other scene could. The little girl reminded her so much of herself as a child. She had been taken from her family, from her brother as he watched in stark terror while she vanished all those years ago. The years afterwards were filled with horror until the group had saved her and made her one of them. She'd agreed with their ideals and had taken part in their work without any qualms until now. Now Jordan's family was feeling the pain her own family had felt, and was feeling to this day. If her group's work continued on track, Jordan would never see her family again. The little girl would be kept in hiding until it was time for her to resurface, and then she and the others would use their gifts to save humanity. It would be years of agony for Jordan, and for the parents left behind.

She started to settle in an overstuffed chair, to continue her watch of the little girl. A mind gently touched hers and she stood up, looking at Jordan in surprise. The connection became stronger even though the child was deeply asleep, and she realized how powerful of a gift Jordan had inherited. It was stronger than any of the other children and if the dark ones had reached her first the world would have been lost. She also realized that only one person would be able to help Jordan bring her gift to full fruition and make it into a world saving ability. Little Jordan had to be returned to her father, or all would indeed be lost.

From her purse she took a small automatic camera then placed the morning paper where the headlines would be in the picture. Standing across the room from the sleeping girl and dog, the red haired woman took a series of photos then placed the camera back in her purse. By the end of the week Jordan's family would know she was safe. What they did about it was up to them.

The streets of Seattle were unfamiliar to Mulder and Scully but not to Sherry Allsman. Having been in the Seattle Police Department for several years, Allsman had requested assignment to Seattle once she'd graduated from the FBI Academy. After five years of service, she was one of the office's top agents and was able to work without the usual turf battles. Allsman drove Mulder and Scully to the best places in the city to catch the latest rumors and gossip about crime. With her as their guide, the agents were able to get further than they would have on their own. And yet, even with Allsman's help, they were coming up empty in clues. No one knew about the child killers, though rumors did abound. According to the informants the killings were by aliens from outer space, illegal aliens from Mexico, devil worshippers and at least a dozen other warped theories that had no base in reality.

It was late evening when Mulder and Scully headed to their hotel rooms, depressed and tired from their day of futile searching. They ate in the coffee shop, saying little during the meal and Scully was the first to leave the table. Mulder paid the check and went after her, find her locked away in her room. He knocked on the door and was worried when she didn't answer directly.

"Scully?" he called. "Come on, open up."

The door opened and Mulder slipped inside, to have Scully staring blankly at him. "I don't feel like company tonight."

She was looking drawn and even more depressed than he felt, which had him even more worried about her. "Scully, talk to me."

"What's there to talk about?" Scully asked tiredly. "Five children are dead and a sixth one is missing and we are at a dead end."

"That doesn't sound like you," Mulder replied. "Giving up isn't in you."

Scully closed the door behind him and gazed up at him for a very long moment before speaking again. "I don't want to give up, Mulder, but where can we go? We don't have one clue to go on. The police are stumped, and our own people are stumped."

"You need a good night's sleep," Mulder said, hoping that a few hours sleep would make his partner more like herself.

"What I need is to find something that will lead us to that little girl." A deep sigh came from her. "Good night, Mulder."

At the door, Mulder paused and faced her. "You might say a prayer, Scully."

Scully fingered the golden cross she always wore. "I have been, Mulder. I don't think anyone is listening." A gentle shove had Mulder out the door, which Scully promptly locked behind him. Thoroughly depressed now, Mulder slowly made his way to his own room.

Her shift of watching little Jordan was over and now another of the group was settling in. With her small case of belongings in hand, she went to her car and drove westward, stopping at the first good-sized town. In a convenience store she dropped off the film and returned a hour later to pick up the photos. From there she continued to drive west, until she reached her destination. She drove through the streets of Seattle, searching for the correct street and address. Once finding the house she parked two houses away and shut off the car's engine. A black wig was taken from her bag and pulled onto her head, then an oversized shirt was put on and she slowly and warily left the car. Moving as casually as possible she walked up to the porch of the large yellow house and dropped an envelope through the mail slot before stepping down from the porch and going back to her car. She had just reached the vehicle when another car approached the house.

From her vantage point the woman watched as two people, a man and a woman, got out of the car and walked up to the house's door. A part of her desperately wanted to go running up to her brother, to throw her arms around him and hug him. But she did not move, for the work of the group was more important than her or her brother's happiness. So she watched as Fox Mulder and his partner were greeted at the door by Catherine Black, then she got in her car and slowly drove away.

Catherine had seen the agents drive up and she knew they had news regarding her daughter. Mustering up all of her strength, Catherine met them at the door and said, "You look like you could use a good cup of coffee. Come on it."

Catherine paused long enough to collect the mail before motioning for them to follow. The house resonated today with emptiness and their footfalls on the wooden floors seemed to echo louder than during their previous visits as they went with Catherine to the kitchen, where she tossed the mail at Frank, who was trying to fix a dripping faucet. All too glad to forget the mess, Black sifted through the mail until he came to an envelope with no return address. Mulder saw his reaction first, with Scully taking note a split second later. Catherine was busy unloading the dishwasher and so she didn't realize anything was wrong until she glanced over her shoulder to see her husband staring at the envelope as if it were something alien.

Moving across the kitchen Catherine reached her husband as he ripped open the envelope and drew out a single photograph. The picture was of Jordan, asleep near a newspaper, her arms wrapped around the sleeping puppy. "Who did this?" she demanded.

Mulder examined the envelope. "Not even a postmark. Someone hand-delivered this."

Holding out her hand, Scully silently asked to examine the photo. A reluctant Black handed it over to her, his arm going around his wife to offer what support he could give. "Mulder, take a look." Her partner moved to look over her shoulder at the picture. "Here."

"The newspaper," Mulder replied, his finger tracing over the foreground of the picture. "We might be able to get a blow-up. See if we can get a name from it."

"May we?" Scully asked Black.

Catherine was the one who answered. "Do what you have to do get her back to us."

Allsman was all too glad to have the photo analyzed and showed Mulder and Scully to the office before returning to another possible lead in the case. A computer expert put the photo through a program, blowing up the newspaper section of the picture. After several attempts they were able to zero in on the front page of the paper.

"Look, there." Scully pointed to the lead story, and the banner just above it. "*The Buffalo's Head,*" she read. "Riddel, Montana."

"I think," said Mulder, "that we finally have a lead. Let's see Allsman."

The agent was on the phone when they reached her office and she motioned for them to wait. When she hung up, she was somber yet hopeful. "Remember that body the police found about four blocks from the Black home?"

Scully nodded that she remembered. "The police thought it was a drive-by shooting."

"They were wrong," Allsman stated. "We've found several more in this section of the country. They make a trail." Allsman pulled an atlas from her desk. She flipped it open to the map of the US and used a red pen to draw a line. "Between Seattle and western Montana."

"Riddel, Montana," Mulder corrected. "From the newspaper."

"I'll contact the Helena office," Allsman said, reaching for the phone.

Mulder and Scully hurried to their car, neither saying much until Mulder was behind the wheel. He was about to pull out of the parking stall when Scully stopped him. "If we're right, Mulder, the girl will need her parents with her."

That Mulder had to agree with. "So long as they stay out of the way."

With the delivery of the news, the atmosphere in the Black house lightened tremendously. While Mulder made arrangements for transportation to western Montana, Catherine went to pack what would be needed for an overnight trip. She had just closed the bag when she felt arms go around her waist and heard her husband speaking to her. "I want you to stay here. There might be shooting."

"If that's the case," argued Catherine, "then that's even more reason I should go. Jordan will need both of her parents with her." Taking the bag from the bed, Catherine left her bedroom.

A government jet was waiting at the airport to flew them to an airport not far from Riddel, Montana. There they were met by agents from the Helena office and an armed team to flush out the kidnappers if necessary. The drive to Riddel took an hour and they arrived to find a quiet small town where you could leave your doors unlocked at night without fear of being attacked. They stopped in front of the local post office and the agents fanned out to try and rundown the exact location of the kidnappers.

Their arrival was being watched by a member of the secret group and he drove to the cabin, where he sounded the alarm to the person watching over Jordan. It was decided that perhaps it was better to leave Jordan with her parents, that perhaps she would be safer with them than she was with the other children. If need be, if more of the dark ones surfaced, they could always take Jordan again. With Jordan contentedly sleeping with her puppy, they got into the cars and drove away from the cabin.

It was nearly dark when the agents regrouped in town and went over a map of the local area, with one of the Helena agents marking the location of the cabin, out in the middle of nowhere. The coming night camouflaged their approach to that cabin and they were able to set up a perimeter around it without any challenge. There were no vehicles near the cabin and a single light was shining inside the building. Using a megaphone, the lead agent addressed those who might be inside the cabin. They received no response. The agent tried again, and again was met by silence.

On his cue the agents move in on the cabin. One of them reached a window and peered inside. That agent motioned to another agent, who peered in through a second window. Then a third agent kicked in the front door and the team stormed inside.

Mulder and Scully entered after the team and found the cabin furnished for use by a young child. There was child-sized furniture including a bed, a refrigerator and a sink and stove. There was a cabinet filled with toys and a food bowl for the dog. As for the missing Jordan, she was cowering in a corner with the puppy held tight in front of her. While Mulder dismissed the team, Scully approached Jordan. "Would you like to see your mommy and daddy?" The little girl rose to her feet, still holding onto the dog for protection.

In ran Catherine, who dropped to her knees and held out her arms. Jordan ran to those arms and snuggled in close, holding on to her mother as tightly as was possible. Catherine kissed her daughter's head and looked up, to see Frank caressing Jordan's hair with a hand. Then he too dropped down on his knees and Jordan turned into his embrace.

"Go with your mother," he told Jordan. "I'll be right out." Catherine took hold of Jordan's hand and guided her to the cars. Benny trotted after them.

Black rose to his feet and stood quietly, his mind open to the vibrations that the room might be giving off. Images flooded his mind, and not the ones he'd been afraid of. He could see an older woman playing cards with Jordan, her favorite game of Old Maid. There was a young man who was teaching Benny to roll over and lie down, to Jordan's amusement.

"These aren't the killers," Black told Mulder and Scully. "They took her to protect her."

"Protect her?" repeated Scully. "From what?"

"The coming darkness," said Black, and he walked from the cabin.

It was the middle of the night by the time the Blacks returned to their home and Catherine put her daughter to bed, clothes and all. Relieved and exhausted, she went to her own bed afterwards. However Black couldn't leave quite so quickly and he stood in the doorway of his daughter's bedroom, watching her sleep.

Jordan, his miracle, had come back home. The dark forces of humanity had lost this one battle, and he and Catherine were the victors. If they were lucky, Jordan would have only a few bad dreams about her time with the captors.

A tiny wisp formed in his mind, one that did not come from his gift. In the vision he saw a redheaded woman in her thirties, standing in the cabin and holding a small camera. She was taking pictures then putting the camera away.

The picture he'd received had been of Jordan with her eyes fully closed and from the picture, fast asleep. So how could she see what the woman was doing? How could Jordan see every move the woman made unless...unless his Jordan had inherited his gift of sight. Was that why she had been taken? And how had the kidnappers known of her gift if he had not?

Too many questions he could not answer. Physically tired and emotionally drained, Black closed the door to the room and went to his own bed.

The day was sunny and cool with only a hint of rain in the forecast. It was early afternoon when Mulder and Scully stopped by the Black house, to say their farewells and to see how the family was doing. Catherine insisted on sending homemade cooking with them, which Scully was not about to refuse. She went to the kitchen to get the package as Mulder talked with Black about the Seahawks and the coming football season.

Black answered the questions then changed the subject with the finesse of a long time agent. "When was your sister abducted?"

"When she was eight," Mulder answered, the pain still present, "when I was twelve."

"You miss her," Black replied, stating the obvious.

"All day, every day." Scully had the package of cookies and she motioned to the front door. Mulder said their good-byes and they left the house.

As the front door clicked shut Jordan looked up from the book she was reading and very quietly said, "Your sister misses you too."

NEW YEARS GIFTS

L.C. Wells

Karen Simms followed Kermit into his apartment. The room was lit by the elegant lamp beside the couch and the flashing lights of the Christmas tree in the apartment next door. The neighbors were having a New Year's Party, and had moved their tree onto the porch.

"Did you have a good trip?" she asked, handing over her coat which he hung in the closet.

"I always go out at Christmas," he replied enigmatically.

"I know. That wasn't the question," she retorted. "What about your trip?"

He smiled. "It was good. Everything worked out."

She wondered what he meant by that but didn't question him again. If he wanted, he'd tell her. Or tell Peter. Or she could always check with Bella at Customs, who wouldn't ask questions. Kermit hadn't gotten that tan in the US; he had to have gone abroad.

"You missed a good party," she started tentatively. "A little rambunctious—"

"So, I heard." He shook his head in amazement. "I'm surprised they thought they would get away with it."

"We worked it out," Simms answered wondering who had told Kermit about the attack. Probably Peter. Had he called Peter before he called her?

"I hear you have a baby now," Kermit said. His hands worked on opening the bottle of wine that sat to one side in a bucket of ice.

She smiled. "A darling baby. I hope that I'll be able to adopt her but..."

"What about now? I mean tonight," he asked. The cork popped out of the champagne.

"Kelly Blake is looking out for her. She loves to be around her."

Kermit's dark eyebrow went up. "What does the Chief think of it?"

Karen chuckled. "I think he likes the baby but won't admit it. He smiles at her and she laughs."

He handed her a goblet of sparkling golden wine and took up his. "So, tonight you are free of baby and work—"

"What is it, Kermit?" she asked, not sipping the wine in her glass. "Is there a problem?"

He choked on his wine. "No! Nothing at all. Why?"

"You sound so reserved. What is it?"

Kermit raised his glass. "To a new year, Captain. May we all have a good year."

She tapped her crystal against his. "More that that, Kermit. To us. To friendship and understanding."

"Yes." His voice softened and he smiled.

She could see his eyes for once. The sunglasses were on the table beside the couch.

They both sipped. "To us, Karen. To friendship and more."

"You missed the Christmas Club at work," she said lightly breaking the suddenly intense mood. "We put your name in the bag along with everyone else, and—"

"Who got me?" he asked, interested despite being sidetracked from his original intent.

"Kelly Blake," Simms laughed. "She had a terrible time trying to find a present for you. She asked everyone. You have everyone intimidated. I believe she found something for your computer."

Kermit flinched. "What kind of thing?"

"Basic," Simms said with a laugh. "Peter helped."

"Oh, good," Kermit said with a breath of relief. "Under $20?"

"Less. I'm sure that it will be useful."

"Ah. Useful. Good. Speaking of that...." He put down his glass and reached for a small wrapped package. The blue ribbon and bow were tied crookedly, as if they had been added at the last moment. "Merry Christmas, Karen."

She studied it for a second, then set her glass down. "I don't have yours with me, Kermit."

"That isn't necessary," he replied.

"I knew you'd say that, but I wanted to." She took the slender box and studied it. The paper was thicker than normal and had exotic green and gold designs on it. It had to come from his trip. What was it? African from the drawings. "I can bring—"

"Please open it," he said with a trace of command. "Now."

She pulled off the bow and ribbon, setting them beside her glass. Then she unwrapped one end and slid her fingers inside and pulled out a box. It was oblong, five by seven inches long, and two inches deep. There was no embossing on the top.

She opened the top and folded back the thin white gauzy paper which covered something. She blinked, then caught her breath.

"It's for your hair," he said in the silence.

"I know," she replied, her voice slightly hushed. There was a catch in her throat. .

The hair pin had two long prongs connected by a hinge to a front piece. The prongs would fold into the two small U-shaped hinges at the end of the front and hold the pin in place in her hair.

It was the front piece that made her catch her breath. The antique Art Nouveau calla lily was being sipped on by a green and blue cloisonne hummingbird; its eye was a small ruby. It looked like a real ruby. Simms didn't doubt it for a second. The curving petals of the lily were inlaid with square-cut opals that glimmered when she shifted it in the light. The bird's long beak was gold. It was very beautiful. And very, very expensive.

"You don't like it?" he said with a touch of uncertainty.

She had never heard that from him before. It jarred her. Who had refused his gifts in the past? Numerous wives, according to Peter... "I love it. I am just.... Kermit, it's so beautiful."

"I saw it in an antique store and had the jewels reset," he said with patent relief. "It's for your hair."

She smiled. "I know." She reached up and pulled out the small pin that held her golden hair back from her face. It fell in a sweep past her shoulders. "I want one more thing from you, Kermit?"

"What?" There was a trace of a smile on his lips and he looked like he knew what she was going to ask for.

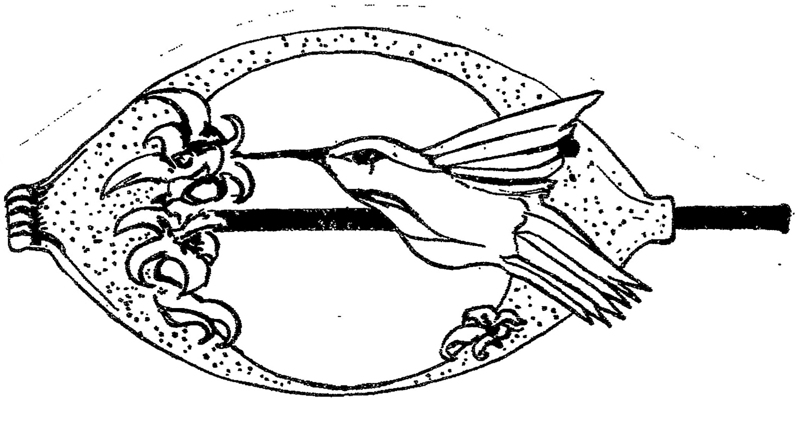
"I want you to put it in my hair. Now."

He chuckled, and moved closer, taking the pin from her hand. Instead of walking around her so he could set it straight, he reached his arms around her, bringing his face up close, and gently lifted her hair. "Where do you want me to put it?"

She softly laughed. His lips were inches from hers. "I'll leave it up to you. I'm sure you'll find a way to figure out a way to make it stay in place."

A minute later, Kermit set the ornament on the counter behind them to free up his hands. Simms already had her hands full.

She'd pick up the pin tomorrow morning before she left.



DREAMTIME

Sheila Paulson

"You look like you were run over with a steam roller, Peter."

With a groan, Peter Venkman lifted his head from the pillow Ray had fetched for him earlier in the evening and glared at Winston. "I practically was," he complained. "Personal remarks are not appreciated. This has not been a good day."

"Better than you think, Peter," Egon said, closing his book and studying the sprawled psychologist. "A fall like that could have been far worse than it was. You're fortunate to be all in one piece. And we are fortunate not to be visiting you in the hospital instead of serving as your personal slaves all evening." The twinkle in his eyes suggested Peter had better enjoy the babying while he could because it probably had run its course.

"Yeah," agreed Ray with a wry grin. "We're glad you're in one piece, even if the piece is pretty spectacular right now. You should see yourself."

"I don't need to *see* myself, Ray. In fact I think I'd rather not see myself. I know how I feel." Peter hurt. Every bone, joint and muscle ached. Although he'd broken no bones and sustained no internal injuries, the fall through the floor in a run-down building they'd de-haunted that afternoon had left him scraped and bruised from head to toe, every joint and muscle aching. X-rays had confirmed that he was all right, but the doctor at the emergency room had told him he'd be sore for a few days and probably feel worse in the morning than he did right now. A most unpleasant prospect.

Not only that, Peter had been nervous, uneasy, all evening, reliving his spectacular fall in his mind. Heights scared him, and he went out of his way to avoid them whenever possible. The job didn't always make it possible, but this had been an accident, pure and simple. He could still remember the frantic, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as he crashed through the weakened floor and crash landed one story below.

A battered old sofa had broken his fall, saving him from a major injury—he hadn't even been rendered unconscious, although he'd been groggy for a moment or two—but he'd come away battered and bleeding from numerous small cuts. Stretched out on the couch in front of the television set all evening adorned with band aids, his muscles had been given a prime opportunity to stiffen up, and the thought of climbing the spiral stairs to the third floor and bed hovered over him like a mocking specter.

"Spectacular?" he echoed Ray. "This spectacular Ghostbuster feels like Winston was right," Peter concurred. The fact that his friends had been hovering and fussing all evening, willing to fetch and carry for him as long as he didn't push them too hard proved the fall had freaked them, too. Peter figured he was good for probably another half-day of it before he'd have to cut his losses and stop asking them to bring him sodas or extra pillows, or jumping whenever he asked for something. He wasn't sure he could get away with it much past breakfast. Janine, of course, might bring him coffee in the morning, but that would be her limit, too. She'd almost fussed over him before he went home, and for Janine, that was as good as it ever got.

He yawned. Even that hurt. "I think I'm about ready to crash. Who wants to follow me up the stairs and push?"

"Guess that's my job," volunteered Winston. "Come on, Ray, let's haul him up. 'Cause I don't think he's gonna like doing it on his own." Yep, the magic was wearing off. They all wore amused expressions. Well, he'd get 'em. Never let it said that Peter Venkman didn't know how to retaliate. It was probably time to short-sheet their beds. He'd think of something, anyway. But he didn't let it show. Instead, he gave a pitiful whimper—it wasn't too overdone, was it?—and held out his hands to be pulled up.

Winston was right; it was not fun. Peter let his two friends do most of the work while Egon hurried up the stairs ahead of them with a look on his face that spoke of a plan he'd forgotten. Peter knew he wasn't rushing up to open Peter's bed and lay out his pajamas. He'd have to have major fractures for that to happen. Egon's fussing never took that direction. It was more likely to lead him to produce a scientific device that, if Peter was lucky, wouldn't explode when he tried to use it. Egon was good for blowing up the lab once every few months; he hadn't done it lately, so maybe he was past due.

He let Ray pull and Winston push, their efforts accompanied by pathetic moans and groans that were only half put on. He had to be careful not to lose the sympathy vote too early. Ray, of course, would be sympathetic a little longer than the other two, but he was perfectly capable of retaliation if he thought Peter had conned him into unneeded sympathy. It was a game Peter enjoyed, one that helped him put the memory of that wild fall away into the far corners of his mind. The security of home always meant far more to him after such a near miss.

When they finally made it to the top of the stairs they encountered Egon wheeling his Alpha-wave generator out of the lab and across the hall to the bedroom, the big, bulky device sliding this way and that as he tried to steer it straight. They followed him there just in time for Egon to position the device in the middle of the room between the four beds and offer one of the sleep-helmets to Peter. He stared at it and at the gizmo he always referred to as 'Egon's good-dream machine' in surprise. It had mini-TV screens on it and four helmets attached to it by connecting cable, intended to be worn by the sleepers to assist them in programming their dreams and ending up with relaxing sleep. Peter didn't entirely trust the device, not since the time three ghosts had popped into it and trapped the guys in the sleep state.

"I'm setting up the Alpha-wave generator for a reason," Egon explained. "I want you to wear the helmet tonight, Peter. Because I don't think you'll sleep well without it."

Peter agreed with that. The machine enabled a person to program his Alpha brain waves while in REM sleep, so he could control his dreams, make them relaxing or exciting, depending on what he wanted at the time. Peter had enjoyed the device more than once before and had always awakened afterwards in a much better state of mind than before he'd gone to bed. Well, except for the time those ghosts had interfered. But Egon had assured him the device was all better now.

"Hey, good idea, Egon," Ray agreed, bouncing over to help Egon make adjustments on the control panel. "Just think, Peter, you'll wake up twice as refreshed as you normally would."

"You mean twice as refreshed for someone who is black and blue over ninety per cent of his body," Peter countered, eyeing the device with disfavor. "You guys aren't gonna tape this and sell the movie rights to my dreams, are you?" he asked as he saw Egon insert a video tape into the appropriate slot. The guys had been known to tease him about the dreams he'd controlled when he used the dream machine. Suspiciously he reached for his pajamas. Maybe it was already payback time for expecting them to fuss over him all evening.

Ray glanced up from the control panel with a wicked grin. "What's the matter, Peter, you planning to make it into a big production?"

"Peter always makes it into a big production," Winston pointed out with a chuckle. "The rest of us have to go in there, too, Egon? I'm not sure I can contend with one of Peter's overblown erotic dreams right now. Not when he makes himself into the stud of the century so no beautiful woman can resist him." He grimaced.

"No, the rest of us must avoid that at all costs." Egon said it deadpan but he was amused, too. Peter could always tell when he was hiding a smile. "I think Peter will sleep better with it. I've configured it for only one sleeper tonight. The recorder is simply a precaution."

"Yeah, and that sleeper's gonna wake up with a stiff neck and a bad hair day," Peter groused, but it was mild complaining. Climbing the spiral stairs to the third floor had not been fun. The thought of a good night's sleep appealed mightily, especially since it would allow him to program his own dreams and head off any nasty dreams about the fall before they could find a good toehold. He suspected that was why Egon was setting up the recording mechanism, not because he wanted to spy on erotic dreams but in case of any lingering nightmares; he'd be able to tell if Peter had headed any off, or Peter could watch the tape himself and gauge the progress of his recovery. Not a bad idea after all; he'd just have to censor himself a little. It wouldn't do to give the guys any ammunition against him. "Anyway, thanks, Egon. I'll give it a shot. But if I hear you guys have been making snide remarks about my dreams, I know how to get my revenge." He let the threat hang over them, because he did know, and all three of them were aware of it. He could be fiendishly inventive when he needed to be. Buttoning up his pajama top, he pulled open his bed and reached for the helmet. "Remember, I'm gonna check that tape in the morning and I may have to confiscate it. On the other hand, if we're talking major motion pictures here, Peter gets the film rights."

Settling the helmet into place, he climbed into bed, stretching out as comfortably as possible with a metal gizmo perched on his head and muscles that protested even the pressure of the mattress against his spine, prepared to let the device work its magic. He could hear the other three preparing for bed, more quietly than usual. Ray talked to Slimer for a few minutes, but the little ghost seemed sleepy, too. Gradually silence fell on the bedroom.

As Peter drifted into repose he was grateful for the thought of restful sleep—until the scarred stranger appeared and wrested control of his dream away from him. At first, Peter's dreams were pleasant, unremarkable, soothing. No repeats of the moment of utter panic when the floor failed beneath him, no death-defying plunge through the collapsing structure in a rattle and crash of falling wood and plaster. Just tranquillity, peace. He encouraged it, steering the dream into restful images, nature scenes, his favorite music, the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. Even asleep, he could feel his muscles relaxing. Maybe he could nominate Egon for the Nobel Prize for the dream machine. He wandered into a dream in which Egon received the prestigious award—and the accompanying monetary gift—and rewarded Peter for nominating him by buying him a silver Porsche.

When the change came, he didn't at first realize it until the light faded to reveal a man sitting at a round table, everything else in the vision fading into shadows, allowing the newcomer to sit outlined in the glow that pinned him like a dim spotlight.

"Hey, que pasa?" Peter's sleeping self demanded. He hadn't programmed any mysterious strangers into his dream and he wasn't sure he liked the change. Something about the eerie figure made him increasingly uneasy. He tried to nudge the dream away from the shadowy outline, knowing without understanding how he knew that he would hate it when the man turned and noticed him, but the dream wouldn't be nudged. It was as if someone had taken over the dream's programming so effortlessly that Peter had missed the transition—and Egon had claimed that was impossible.

At first the cryptic stranger didn't respond to Peter's presence. He was turned partly away from Venkman so all the sleeping man could see was a vast expanse of reddened, puckered skin that ran down the right cheek from forehead to chin, continued down the side of his neck into his shirt, and twisted the ear with the stark evidence of an old burn. Salt-and-pepper hair grew thickly beyond the scar line and had been induced to lie over the temple to hide some of it, not out of vanity; there was not one line of vanity in the man's body. The slump of the shoulders and the way the hands curled into clawlike fists spoke of a despair so deep Peter hesitated to go closer to investigate. But the hairstyle was not a product of vanity. If it were, he would have presented an unscarred side to Peter. Unless, of course, the other side of his face was worse. Something about the unexpected man made Peter shiver as if a deep frost had settled over the land, as if it were the start of an endless winter. He wanted to run like mad, but his feet wouldn't let him. Unexpectedly they seemed bolted to the floor.

The burned man sat at a table on which lay an occult chart filled with esoteric diagrams and drawings, vaguely Cabalistic, something Ray would probably have recognized instantly. Peter knew he would not remember them vividly enough to translate or even describe them thoroughly when he awakened.

The man's hands, one scarred and twisted though evidently functional, the other marked irregularly across the back although straight, held a small, lined notebook in which he wrote frantically, jotting down figures and information from the charts and from a stack of old books that sprawled across the table and stacked at his feet. The notes were too far away for Peter to read. Scientific charts, texts, and diagrams were shuffled in among the mysticism, things that wouldn't have been out of place in Egon's workbooks and, endless pages of meticulous records, although the rough notes in the margins lacked their neat precision. The odd juxtaposition of science and superstition intrigued Peter, but the unexpected panic he felt dulled the interest.

Just as Peter decided to head out of the dream before he lost control of the situation entirely, the stranger stiffened as if he had sensed Peter's presence. He didn't turn to face him;

perhaps he didn't have to. Instead he bowed his head over his hands and breathed a fervent, "Thank god!"

The urgency of that whispered prayer made Peter shiver. He had been deliberately sought, deliberately invaded, and that scared him. "Who are you?" he demanded suspiciously. "What are you doing in my dream?"

"Your dream. My nightmare," the enigmatic man responded, his voice hoarse, raspy, as if the smoke from the fire that had twisted his face had scarred his throat and larynx too badly for it to heal properly. The very sound of it made Peter want to clear his own throat. "I've tried and tried. I can't keep count of how often I tried. I thought I'd never get here."

"You tried to come to my dream?" Peter asked. "What did I ever do to you?"

"You took away everything that gave me reason to live," rasped the stranger. He didn't lift his head or look at Peter, but suddenly his shoulders shook. He lifted the scarred hands and hid his face in them weeping with an old grief that time had failed to ease, that time would never ease. "Gone, all gone..." He didn't sound entirely sane, but the devastation he indicated could well have caused him to surrender his sanity. The madman, one of his professors had been fond of quoting, was not the man who had lost his reason. He was the man who had lost everything except his reason. Now that was a terrifying thought.

"I never saw you before," Peter defended himself, holding back a sudden urge to pat the man on the shoulder in the way of comfort. "Are you a ghost?"

"I'd rather be a ghost, I think," the stranger husked. "Easier...wouldn't have to go on living like this." Although he couldn't explain it, Peter didn't think he was referring to the scars but to something worse than the ruin of his body. Something devastating that hovered in the shadows waiting to pounce on Peter, too.

"Why are you here anyway?" he persisted. This was too strange, yet at the same time frightening all out of proportion to what seemed to be happening. He didn't know why he was so terrified but inside, he was as cold as ice and his stomach had twisted into frantic knots. His scalp crawled.

"Listen," the stranger said. "You have to listen. You have to listen."

"I'm listening. Who are you? This is my dream."

"Yes. That's why I'm here. I have to be here. You have to listen." It was as if he'd struggled so hard to convey the message that when it came right down to it he had to struggle to refocus his goal.

"What do you want me to know?" Peter asked in a soothing voice, taking a step closer, trying to see over the hunched shoulder, trying to make sense of the esoteric design, the scrawled notes.

The scarred face lifted from the near-crippled hands but didn't turn. "No. Don't. Not yet. You have to listen first."

"I'm listening."

"Not enough. Oh, god, not enough. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I have to..." To Peter's horror, he hid his face in his hands again and sobbed with a grief so deep Peter couldn't imagine anything ever filling the empty places. Then he controlled himself as if desperation alone drove him, and started to turn toward Peter.

Whether it was anticipation of worse burns to come or a fear of a shocking knowledge that hovered, waiting to pounce, at the edges of his awareness, Peter jerked awake with a yell, startling his three friends into wakefulness. He wasn't sure how long he sat there amid his twisted blankets, dazed and shaken with an emotion he didn't understand, cold terror pulsing through his veins, weighted down by the night invader's sorrow. When Egon, whose bed was next to his, gripped his shoulders and shook him to try to awaken him and Ray arrived in a frantic scramble to pull the helmet off, Peter cried out and grabbed for it, knowing he had to go back. He didn't understand why but it was vital that he return. The dream was unfinished; it was essential he hear what the stranger had invaded his sleep to tell him. He had to know even though the thought of entering the dream scared him so much it was all he could do to keep from grabbing a crowbar and smashing the Alpha-wave generator down to a heap of twisted metal. "Egon, Egon, somebody came into my dream. It's urgent. I've gotta go back."

"Your dream was invaded by an outside force?" Egon asked in shocked realization as if until then he had merely suspected a fall-induced nightmare. He spun away and returned with a P.K.E. meter which he activated and waved at Peter in an urgent sweep. It didn't even flicker. Egon blinked at it, redid the settings, and passed it over Peter and then the machine. "How odd. Clearly something happened, something beyond your control, but the meter doesn't register anything except a slightly elevated biorhythm reading which is commensurate with your distraught state. When the ghosts invaded our dreams before, the P.K.E. readings were very strong afterward. Slimer knew they were in there." He gazed up at the hovering ghost, who stared at Peter with wide, scared eyes.

"Slimer didn't wake up until Peter yelled," Ray said. "I saw him jump when I woke up."

"I realize that, Ray. Did you sense anything, Slimer?" Egon prodded gently.

Slimer stared at him, then shook his head vehemently. "Heard Petaw yell," he burbled. "No bad ghosts. Petaw have ba' dream?"

"I think he did, Spud," Winston replied. "It's okay. You can't see anything funny about the dream machine, can you?"

Slimer sniffed it warily, then shook his head. "Nope. Not funny. Like always."

"How very peculiar. As I said, your biorhythms are slightly elevated, Peter, but that could be explained by the emotional overload you seem to be suffering. Did you dream about the fall?" It was the easiest explanation he could see for Peter's reaction; he would naturally examine that possibility before he would consider anything else.

Peter shook his head. "It wasn't that. I was being careful to stay away from anything that might trigger bad dreams. It was this guy who showed up and wouldn't go away, and he had something to tell me."

"Can we play it back, Egon?" Ray asked, gesturing at the recording section. "That way we can tell if it was an entity invading Peter's dream."

"Of course."

Peter was glad now that Egon had insisted on the recording. "Play it back," he cried. "Then you'll see what happened."

The tape didn't work right. Something had affected it, something beyond Egon's explanation. The man was visible on the recording, but he was blurry, only a dim outline emerging from deep shadows, his words running together in a meaningless jumble. Peter's reactions were clearer, but even they didn't explain the sense of utter panic the dream had caused. He sat curled up on the foot of his bed watching the small screen, shaking his head, cold and anxious as if something malevolent hung over him waiting to strike. He wasn't afraid of the man in the dream; he was afraid of the feelings the man in the dream had produced.

"Was it clearer when you saw it?" Egon asked, raising an expectant eyebrow in Peter's direction. He knew Peter well enough to understand that he wouldn't freak at normal spookiness, not after a career of busting ghosts. He might fear a ghost or demon, but such fear was normal, reasonable, nothing like the panic he felt right now.

"Yeah. I don't know who he is but he has these burns, all over," Peter gestured vaguely at the right side of his face and at his hands. "He..." His voice trailed off as he considered it. "He was the saddest, most bitter person I ever saw. And he needed me to help him."

"It was only a dream, Peter," Egon reassured him in a deep, comforting rumble. "There's nothing to suggest anything else yet."

"Was it? You said we control what happens in there, Egon, remember? You had us practice and practice after that time our dreams were invaded and you did all sorts of adjustments on your crazy invention to prevent nasty characters party-crashing. You said nobody could take over again."

"I did say that, and the evidence of the meters indicates that was not a spirit force that you encountered."

"So what was it, Egon?" Peter persisted, desperate for an answer that would remove the sense of frantic urgency and cold fear that pervaded him. "Indigestion? Bad chili from dinner?"

"Hey, maybe it was somebody's OBE," Ray theorized excitedly, grabbing onto the footboard of Peter's bed and smiling in delight at the idea. "You know, astral projection or something. An out-of-body experience. Somebody alive wouldn't set off a P.K.E. meter, would he, Egon? Even if he was in the astral state?"

"Hmm. Possible," Egon replied, studying the P.K.E. meter again in fascination as if he had overlooked a conceivable answer. "Certainly an interesting theory, Raymond. Some dreams are said to be impressions of astral flights, in which an urgent mission is powerful enough to detach the astral body from the physical. It would explain the vagueness of the projection in the image. It's possible someone else is working on a device similar to mine, and used it at the same time."

"Yeah," agreed Ray. "You might have been sharing the same dreamscape with him, Peter. This is great."

"Great for you, maybe," Peter said dryly. "It wasn't a fun time, Ray. I know you and Egon would do anything in the name of science, but I'm not quite ready to be somebody's guinea pig."

"Perhaps you were in sync with him somehow, Peter, or simply that the Alpha wave generator made you receptive," Egon theorized.

"There's no proof you were invaded by an astral traveler. Perhaps we should all don the helmets for the rest of the night. It could be possible such a person has accidentally severed his ties with his own body. If we could learn his identity we might be able to help him find his way home."

"Go in there again?" Away from the intense emotions he'd experienced inside the dream, Peter was hesitant to experience it again. Yet he knew he would have to do it. He wasn't sure why, but it was vital.

"We need more information," Egon replied. "But because in theory no one should be able to invade the Alpha-wave generator after the modifications Ray and I made to it and the way we programmed it so it would react to us specifically. Each helmet is modified for the individual sleeper. We've run endless tests to make certain it was safe. It should have been reacting to your neural impulses, Peter, not picking up stray vibrations from passing astral bodies. Not only that, I had calibrated it for one sleeper, which means a second presence should have failed to gain entry to your dream. There would simply have been no room for them."

"Gee, that's right," Ray replied. "You shouldn't have been visited, Peter, not after all Egon's work on the generator. Unless you projected that guy out of your subconscious."

"That shouldn't be possible," Egon replied. "Although perhaps it is the best explanation yet. Perhaps your subconscious mind controlled the dream, Peter, and produced the image you saw. Yet, remember, Ray, the figure produced a fear reaction in Peter."

"Hey," objected Venkman. "If the Bogeyman had popped into your dreams out of your subconscious, I bet you'd have done a little shaking in your boots, too. Maybe it was some kind of gut reaction, especially if he popped up out of my subconscious."

"Naturally," Egon replied immediately, unoffended. "I wasn't indicating a lack of courage on your part, Peter. Simply that we all have hidden bugaboos in our subconscious minds. You, as a psychologist, should know that."

Peter did. He also knew weirdness occurred in everybody's dreams. What made this one so different was that he hadn't been in a typical sleep state; he'd been in a position to program his own Alpha brainwaves, and he didn't understand how he had managed to produce a dreamscape capable of evoking such a violent gut reaction. He'd been relaxed, content. Now he was edgy and nervous, half afraid to glance over his shoulder for fear he'd see something dark and deadly creeping up on him. Drawing his knees up against his chest, he wrapped his arms around them to try and still the near-subliminal shivering that affected his body.

"Yeah, and who's to say what triggers stuff like that," Winston said. "Come on, Pete, think about how you talk to us after a rough bust. Sometimes we need to let go, sound off, work through it instead of holding it in. You had a rough one this afternoon; maybe it dished up a nightmare when you were relaxed and not expecting it."

"Hey, yeah," Ray replied. "That was a nasty fall, Peter. It scared all of us, but it had to have been worse for you."

He grinned weakly. "Okay, yeah, you've got me there. Heights bug me sometimes. Maybe it did open the floodgates a little. But... Egon, he wanted me to listen. He was desperate for me to listen. He said I'd taken away everything that gave him a reason to live. I never did anything like that to anybody in my whole life. I never even wanted to do that to anybody, not even Walter Peck. Maybe Nexa, but I didn't even trash the big tower of blubber for 'eating' you guys. Maybe this character just wandered into the wrong dream."

"Did he look at all familiar?" Egon asked.

"No." He shook his head then stopped, trying to think. "Well, there was something... I can't pin it down. It was one of those subliminal things. He didn't sound familiar either but he had a really raspy voice like the fire had damaged his throat or lungs or something. I don't know who he was or why he was bugging me. I don't like this. Are you sure it's not just bad chili?"

"Something does appear on the video tape, Peter." Egon pointed to the image he'd frozen with the pause button. In it, it was possible to make out the blurred outline of the circular table and see something white lying on it, but the burned stranger was nothing more than a shadow, man-shaped but undefined, as if the tape had only recorded the memory of his passing. "It's not clear enough for the rest of us to recognize the figure, but it was definitely real. What was he doing, could you tell? It looked as if he had books and papers."

Peter explained as best he could. "Science and magic all thrown together," he concluded. "Like he was desperate and he didn't want to close away one of his options, even if it was farfetched or he didn't entirely understand it."

Egon stared at him with sudden interest. "You're projecting motivations upon him, Peter.

Do you realize that?"

"No I'm not. I'm...interpreting what I saw. At the time I was just reacting, and it gave me a terrific fear response that I didn't understand. But what I did feel was how desperate he was. He wanted something from me, and I had the feeling I was the only guy in the world who could help him."

"Gosh, we've gotta try to contact him again then," Ray breathed. "Even if I can't see him any clearer than that, he gives me a kind of visceral reaction, too. Like we have to do what he wanted."

"Hey, me too," agreed Winston. "You'd think I'd be pissed at him for sneaking in and messing with Pete's head or crowding into his dream, because it might be my dream next, but I'm not. I can feel the fear, somehow, just looking at that blurry picture, but what I can't feel is any kind of threat—at least not from him." He gestured at the screen. "Count me in for trying to help."

Peter glanced at Egon, who was frowning. The physicist's glasses had slid down toward the tip of his nose, a certain sign he was fascinated. "Hmm. What we have is a dream invasion that does not register on the P.K.E. meters. Ergo, it is not a ghost. I checked biorhythms as well and only detected Peter's, although slightly enhanced, but I'm not certain I could detect an astral projection with the current settings. In essence, there is no way to prove anyone but Peter was in the dream—other than the blurry image on the video tape and from Peter's emotional reaction, which is valid evidence, and which has carried over, although to a lesser degree, to all of us. Peter. I'm certain you were hoping for a different dream, perhaps one with Kim Basinger in it."

"Or Sandra Bullock," Peter volunteered. "Yeah, I was thinking of a good time when I went to bed. Unless my subconscious mind dredged up something that wasn't openly familiar, I was invaded."

"Invaded by someone who didn't leave a psi trace," Egon concurred. "And that, I find alarming. If you go back in—"

"Egon, I have to." Peter didn't understand why, but the other man's desperation was contagious. He felt it as strongly as if it had been his own emotion. "I don't get it, but I know it's important."

"In that case, one of us will have to remain outside the dream as a control. I do think you must return to the dream state. All of us can feel the urgency. Someone is trying to contact you about an important matter. Perhaps I would be best qualified to monitor the dream."

"Yeah," Ray replied. "But you might be best qualified to interpret it from the inside, too, Egon. And I just thought of something. What if it's some kind of trick, a lure, you know, a way to trap us in the dream forever? It isn't only ghosts who are out to get us. The Bogeyman was a physical entity."

"The Bogeyman's safe in the containment unit," Egon said hastily. When they gazed at him, he said, "I check the unit daily to monitor the spirit energy within. Some ghosts eventually deresolve, even in the unit, but they're mostly class threes and fours. I've developed an equation to allow for that. But I do monitor the powerful entities confined there to make certain none of them could have broken out."

To make sure the Bogeyman was still safely locked away, Peter realized. "Yeah, but physical entities have a negative valence, don't they? I remember you saying he was a minus nine."

Egon nodded. "A P.K.E. meter will record a negative valence automatically, and it didn't when I monitored you when you first woke up, Peter. All I picked up were your normal biorhythms, which were slightly elevated, either by the adrenaline the dream produced in you or by the Alpha state induced by the generator."

"So whatever was in there isn't a ghost and it isn't a physical entity, and it doesn't have a biorhythm," Peter said, checking off the possibilities on his fingers. "You saying it's something that I dredged up out of my subconscious and gave life to or something like that?" He didn't like that idea at all. The dark things that lurked waiting in people's minds didn't need to be brought to life before they were ready to emerge. "How could we trap something like that if it broke free and went rampaging through the city?"

"Wow, Peter." Ray found that possibility exciting. "I wonder if something like that could really happen."

"Not as a by-product of the Alpha-wave generator," Egon replied, "and I'm sure Peter will claim that the subconscious doesn't produce anything vivid enough to appear on film."

"It does, though," Peter said. "Remember when we had all the trouble in here before? Winston was messing around with Star Trek stuff and you could see it. It even made him bald. I was on a game show and Ray was playing Tarzan or something. None of that was real, but it showed up on the tape you made, clear as a bell. So whether this came out of my own deep, dark, unconscious mind or whether something from outside sneaked in, it was real, even if it doesn't show up clearly."

"If it was from your mind, Peter, I believe it would have been clearer," Egon replied. "All of us have learned to control dreams within the workings of the generator. But right now, I do think we have to try it again. I shall monitor the dreams and will wake you immediately if I perceive any threat. Since you were able to come out of the dream on your own just now, I don't believe you could be trapped in there, especially since you're alert to the possibilities, but I still want to monitor the results." He adjusted the machine to configure it for three sleepers. "I don't plan to put Ray and Winston into your dream, Peter, although I could do that if necessary. If you personally are the target of the scarred stranger, perhaps he will come to you again. If it's not aimed at you specifically but is in fact a generic cry for help, either Ray or Winston might pick up on it separately."

"So what should we do, Spengs?" Peter asked.

"Just try to relax and go with the dream, Peter. I know it produced a fear response, but try to ignore that as much as possible. Interact with the figure if you can, and find out what he wants from you."

"It was the urgency, Egon. I don't know why but the urgency scared me."

"Then let the device relax you enough for sleep, Peter. And remember, I'll be here and awake, watching over your dreams. If he appears again, we'll find out what he wants. You won't be in danger. I shall be prepared for every contingency and, if necessary, I can send the dreaming Ray and Winston to your aid." He settled the helmet over Peter's head again while Ray and Winston took their own helmets and retreated to their beds.

Peter would have been too tense to have slept again if not for the machine's soothing effects. His muscles were taut and aching, his bruises tender, and it was impossible to find a comfortable spot, no matter how he turned and twisted. But all of a sudden sleep caught him and he sank into it, deep and comfortable, relaxing automatically.

No matter how hard he tried to guide his dreams to the man who claimed to need him so desperately, he couldn't find him. It was as if the 'astral plane' had shut down for the night. Eventually Peter sank into restful dreams and when he awoke in the morning, his body felt refreshed.

But in his mind he knew something waited, something needed to be done.

"I had him. I had him." The scarred man bolted upward so quickly his arm gave a painful pull, the puckered flesh across his shoulder twingeing, reminding him he'd sold his youth and health in a futile quest five years earlier. "I had him. He was right there. He saw me and he heard me."

"Did you tell him?" asked his companion. The two men stared at each other across the round table. Behind them, the woman watched, unspeaking, her eyes huge and anxious. The atmosphere of the room was full of hidden tensions, unspoken shadows.

"I tried. I... He didn't know me. He didn't understand. I didn't know how to tell him and when I tried to look him in the eye, he panicked and woke up."

"But you have to," his friend persisted. "You've been saying for months now this might work. It's our only chance."

"Crazy, isn't it?" He massaged his temples, one smooth under his fingertips, the other puckered and wrinkled. Sometimes the dead nerve endings gave him flashes of an old pain, something long ago accepted, something almost welcomed. There were times when he poked at the dead flesh, trying to induce pain deliberately, as if the disfiguring scars weren't reminder enough. "But it worked. All these months, preparing, setting it up. It worked. I remembered... You should have seen him." He made a frustrated gesture. "He didn't know me. He didn't understand."

"Can you try again?" asked the woman anxiously. She stretched out a slender hand and touched his good shoulder gently.

"I have to. Even if I have to spend weeks sleeping. I have to. It's the only chance we've got—the only chance they've got." His eyes stung as he gazed at his two companions. "I've gotta make it work."

"But..." began the other man.

"You never believed it," he accused bitterly, frustrated by his failure when he had come so close.

"No. I hoped, though. You did it because you had to but you never hoped. You did it because you took it as a debt. But it was never a debt. It was an accident, plain and simple, and you did everything you could. More than anyone else could have."

"Yeah, well, it wasn't enough, was it?" Even now the memory of the accident was vivid in his mind, the roar of the explosion that had jarred him from sleep, the crackle and heat of the flames, the agony that seared his body as he plunged into it in a desperate rescue attempt, the misery that filled his mind as he sat for weeks, bandaged and weak, beside the hospital bed, watching life trickle out of the battered form he guarded. When the eyes that had watched him with a knowledge that transcended the broken body had finally dulled into nothing, he had ranted and cursed and raved, and they'd had to sedate him and take him back to bed. He'd known it would happen, known there was nothing but death, but he'd held on as long as he could, ignoring his own pain, battling the stubborn doctors, every waking minute there, watching life slip away, trying desperately to hold on because the other was already gone.

His companion had been there with him; they'd lived the death-watch together, but he'd shut him out, shut everyone out but the woman who wept at the foot of the bed and then found the courage to come forward and smile, to tell little stories, to hold the unmarked hand and squeeze it, to talk of hopes and dreams. When the eyes had dulled she had gone away and stayed away for more than a year. He hadn't blamed her.

Now he looked past the companion to the woman and said, "I have to do it again."

"I know. I'll help you," she said, as solemn as a vow.

"But it's over," the companion said. "It's over long ago. You can't change what happened. I hate seeing you tear yourself up like this."

"But it isn't over. I can change it. I'm going to. Because otherwise, what's the point in anything?"

"The point is that you're alive. We're alive. This may be a lousy hand, but it's the one fate dealt us. I'll back you. I'll do anything I can to help you. You know that. But if it doesn't work, you can't go on blaming yourself, punishing yourself. No one could have done more."

The woman put her arms around him. "You'll do it. I know you will. I know you can."

"You'll help me?"

"I'd do anything..."

Once he would have smiled at such a blanket promise, but those days were long ago. Instead he reached up and ran scarred fingers across her cheek, wiping away the tears that sparkled there. "I know you will. I couldn't have done this without the two of you."

"So you want to try again?" asked the companion.

"I have to."

The other man snapped his fingers. "I've got an idea." Crossing the room, he opened a dresser drawer and pulled out a folder from which he produced an old newspaper. "Take this with you. If you can't find the right words or if you can't make him listen, show it to him. It might be the proof you need."

His eyes fell upon the stark headline and the old pain hit with full force, the agony as vivid as it had been that morning, when he had awakened in the hospital to find his life in pieces. The hand he reached for the page trembled but the other two kindly ignored it. They were the only ones who understood, the ones who helped, who didn't keep saying, "It's time to move on." They knew his dream was worth everything he had to pay for it: time, effort, years of learning disciplines not his own. But he'd made a promise to the dulling eyes and to the eyes that had never opened again after the fire, a promise he would break only by dying. And, god help him, he was still alive.

At first, there had been no answers, no solution. It wasn't until a few months ago after everything else had failed that he remembered one more possibility. Maybe he'd even *dreamed* it. But if there was a way across the void, a way to reach into another life and salvage what had once been good, he was determined to try it, even if it killed him.

The woman turned her head away from the newspaper as if she couldn't bear it either. "You can do it," she repeated under her breath. "I know you can."

But when he fell asleep again, he could no longer touch the other.

Egon was dozing over the controls of the Alpha-wave generator when Peter finally roused. It wasn't that late, but he knew he was mostly slept out. The weary angle of Egon's body as he leaned his forehead against the console made Venkman realize he'd better wake up so Egon could have some sleep of his own.

A glance around the room showed him Ray just rousing, lifting off his own helmet. Winston was up already, and Peter could hear his distant voice raised in song from the shower. Peter sat up, still wearing the helmet, and caught Ray's eye. "Anything?"

Ray shook his head. "Just normal dreams. No guy with scars, no mysterious papers and books, no warnings." He sounded disappointed.

At the sound of their voices Egon roused, lifted his head, and blinked at them dazedly, the lenses of his glasses magnifying his eyes, making him look sleepy and owlish. "Oh, you're up."

"I'm not sure you are," Peter replied. He scratched his forehead without dislodging the dream helmet, wincing as his fingers inadvertently encountered one of his bruises. "Did you get any sleep at all?"

"Yes, in between monitoring you. I checked the readings every half hour, as well as wiring in a fail-safe alarm that would alert me if anything unusual happened. I watched your dreams in turn, but saw nothing other than the most ordinary dreaming."

"Gee, too bad," Ray said, rubbing his tousled hair. He always appeared much younger than his years when he awakened in the morning, even with his beard stubble. "How do you feel, Peter?"

"Still achy, but not as bad as I expected." He hesitated then added sneakily. "I don't think I'm up to washing Ecto, though."

"Ordinarily we wouldn't let you get away with a remark like that," Egon replied with carefully suppressed amusement. "But when you shave and see yourself in the mirror you'll understand why you have a few days' grace."

"Yeah, Pete, that's a great shiner," said Ray, leaning closer to tilt Peter's chin and take a good look at it.

"Oh, no! Tell me I don't have a black eye," Peter moaned. "I'm supposed to take Mallory out dancing tonight and I just know she'll throw a fit when she sees me." Of course there was always the sympathy angle. If he played his cards right...

"I didn't dream about that guy with the burn scars," Ray said as he opened his dresser to dig out clean shorts and a tee shirt. "Did you, Peter?"

Reminded of the man, he felt all the urgency come crowding back and he turned to Egon with a near-frantic need he still didn't understand. "He didn't show up again. Egon, what am I gonna do?"

"I've been considering the possibilities," the physicist replied as if he understood the strength of Peter's desperation. "As yet, I have no valid hypotheses. I have a vague theory, though."

"What theory, Egon?" Winston asked from the doorway, his voice muffled as he pulled a knit shirt over his head.

"That the scarred man didn't return because Peter was not alone in the dreamscape. Even though you and Ray didn't share Peter's dreams, the device was configured for three sleepers instead of one."

"You mean if I want to find out what's going on, I have to go in there alone?" Peter asked, unhappy with the theory. "He'd counted on Ray and Winston arriving to stand with him if the scarred man reappeared. The thought of facing him alone disturbed him.

"You say this man did not look at you, yet he accused you of harming him in an unspecified manner?" Egon asked.

"Accused me of destroying his life," Peter reminded him. "Or something like that. "Trashing everything that mattered to him. Egon, what if it hasn't happened yet? What if I have a thrower accident and neutronize an innocent bystander or something?"

"Hmm," Egon said, Peter's words striking a chord. "You bring up an interesting point. Not that you might have an accident with your particle thrower, of course, though anything is possible, but that the dream visitor came to warn you of something, a danger you haven't yet foreseen. "n omen."

"Oh, great, I can see myself living in this helmet for the next six months while you do tests," Peter groused. He wanted to get up and shave, and brush his teeth, and the thought of the hot water of the shower on his aching muscles was as much to be anticipated as his date with the lovely Mallory. But he couldn't let it go on any longer. He had to know, and know right now. "Bring on the electrodes, big guy, and let's get it over with."

"That's odd, Peter," Egon said, glancing at the machine.

Ray had been halfway out the door, heading for the shower, but now he returned. "What, Egon?"

"I'm picking up a reaction from the machine as if you were using it, Peter, but you're wide awake. Let me try something." He reached over to the dials and changed the configuration, deleting the stations in use for Ray and Winston so Peter's helmet was the only one activated. This time, they all saw it. The screen fuzzed, blurred, and an image glowed there, so faint as to be nearly invisible as if it weren't really there but were a mere reflection off a nearby pane of glass. It wasn't clear enough to be recognized, but it could have been the same shadowy figure the tape had detected before.

"Wow," breathed Ray, craning his neck to see over Egon's shoulder. "I think it's him. I think he's in there right now, even with Peter wide awake. That's not possible, is it, Egon?"

Peter reached up as if to yank off the helmet but at the last minute he paused, hands inches away from it. "Egon, what should I do?"

The physicist glanced up from his unresponsive P.K.E. meter. "I think you have to know the truth, Peter. You have to communicate with him. I don't know why, but you feel it's important, don't you?" He looked Peter straight in the eye.

Peter nodded. "I don't understand it, Egon, but when I see him—well, I know he's not gonna lie to me. He's desperate and I'm his only hope. I don't know how I know that, but I do. It's something I can feel all the way down to my bones."

"But you said it was scary, man," Winston reminded him.

"I know. But I have to do it anyway. Half our jobs would be scary if we let them, but we still go after the ghosts." He hated this. It still might be a trap, a means of destroying one of the Ghostbusters. It might be something nasty that had been long-trapped in his subconscious mind and was only now struggling to be free, perhaps aroused by the panic created by his fall, but Peter didn't really think so. "He's...familiar, Egon," he said. "I don't understand it, I don't really recognize him, and I don't know why, but I have to go in and listen. This time I won't panic and wake up. All I'll need is one of you to hang out in here while I'm sleeping in case I'm wrong and it's a trap."

"I'll do it," Winston volunteered. "I've had my shower, I'm dressed and ready. Egon ought to catch a nap, too."

"No, I'm awake," Egon contradicted him. "I slept well until Peter roused at three. And I've dozed off and on since then. However, I'll shower and dress and stay nearby in the lab. I want to work on the upgraded EAE."

"And what's that when it's at home?" Peter asked. Egon always had some new Alphabet of a gizmo he was playing with.

"The Ecto Aroma Eliminator," Ray reminded him. "Remember a few years ago when Egon worked on it, but it had an unstable isotope and nearly blew up that kid, Kenny, the one who hung around here wanting to be a Ghostbuster."

"Oh. That EAE." Peter remembered the incident; he'd given the device to the boy who had followed him around with such hero worship and he'd felt bad about the crisis that followed. "I didn't know you were working on a new version. Are you sure this one's safe, Egon?"

"It's not yet ready for field tests, Peter, but I've designed a containment interface that damps down the force of the explosion and substituted what I hope is a more stable isotope this time around. It won't take out a whole city block if it does prove unworkable."

"Oh, good. I knew I could count on you to be safe, Spengs. You haven't blown up the lab in months. Could it be you're learning caution in your old age?"

"It's still in the development process," Ray replied. "At least we figured out how to turn it off when it builds to overload." He turned and headed for the shower again, sublimely unconcerned about the possibility of danger. That was Ray. Not even the thought of a new demon had power to daunt him.

"At least if we catch it in time," Egon replied.

"And you're gonna work on it in here, in our home?" Peter echoed in disbelief.

"We've designed a mini-bunker to contain it," Ray reminded him, pausing in the doorway. "If we can get rid of the stink from certain ghosts it's gonna be worth it."

"Not if we put a crater in the middle of Chinatown, it's not," Winston said darkly.

"We're employing state of the art security measures, Winston," Egon replied. "I'm going to clean up, then Ray and I will put in some time on it. If you'll monitor Peter while he sleeps, you can alert us if the screen reveals anything."

"Gotcha," agreed Winston and grabbed the mystery he'd been reading the night before. Dragging up a comfortable chair he plopped down on it. "Okay, Peter, here's your big chance. For once, we want you to sleep in."

"Finally," Peter said with a sidelong glance at the almost-shape in the screen. "My life is complete." But he lay down and closed his eyes with no little sense of nervous anticipation.

This time, the dream was waiting for him. It seemed he had scarcely closed his eyes when the world around him darkened down to the dimly-lit table and the seated man. He was still turned away from Peter, but instead of working with formulae, he had a newspaper spread before him on the table.

Peter took that as a bad sign. He wasn't sure why but he didn't want to move closer. What he wanted to do was turn around and run like hell, never looking back. Filled with horrified expectation, he took one slow step closer. "Uh, hi."

The scarred man stiffened, his whole body jerking. "Thank god," he said, as he had said the first time. "It's not too late? Tell me it's not too late."

"Too late for what?" Peter asked warily. He was positive he wouldn't like the answer.

His question must have been the right response. The scarred man heaved a vast sigh, breaking off to cough. Peter realized the fire that had twisted him must have caused lung damage. The salt-and-pepper hair was grey unnaturally, as if something had stolen years from his life.

"If you have to ask, it's all right. It's not too late. Peter..."

So he did know who he was talking to. His invasion of Peter's dream was personal, not a random arrival, not a fluke caused by the Alpha wave generator. He had been sought out on purpose.

"Who are you?" Peter asked. "What do you want from me?"

"I want—I need you to read this paper." He scooped it up with a twisted hand, holding it in Peter's direction. "Now. I've tried and tried to reach you. I didn't think it would work, but it was all I had. I had to try. I had to. All those hours and days sitting there watching him die, knowing he was alert in that broken shell, hearing me as I talked to him, knowing he was dying... I had to do something. I don't care if it kills me, but I had to try. Read it."

Peter took the paper. It was strange that he could feel it as if it were real and not an element of the dreamscape. "Who are you?" he asked as the paper crackled in his hands.

"Read it. I can't say it, not to you but I have to tell you. I can't..." His voice caught.

The urgency he projected was palpable. Peter lifted the paper and stared at it, at the headline that hit him with the force of a racing car at top speed.

"'EXPLOSION ROCKS GHOSTBUSTER CENTRAL.'" Peter read those words aloud, his stomach knotting up as he saw the subheading below it. "'Stantz dead. Spengler dying. Venkman seriously injured.' Jesus."

All those hours and days sitting there watching him die...

"Egon?" he faltered. "You mean Egon? He...died? Uh, is going to die? Ray died? They're both dead?"

"The light just went out of his eyes. I saw him go away and I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop it. There was nothing I could do but be there, so he wouldn't have to die alone." Abruptly he moved, swung around, pushed himself to his feet with an effort that spoke of a very old pain. He stood eye to eye with Peter, of a height with him, and he gazed at Peter out of a face that was marred on one side, untouched on the other. There were lines Peter had never seen on the unscarred side, deep grooves between nose and mouth, wrinkles across the brows. The eyes were hollow with the kind of unhappiness that never stops hurting. But they were green eyes, and the mouth that twisted so wryly as Peter stared at the vision in sheer horror was the same one that grinned at him out of his own mirror. It was his own face, torn apart by the fire, by the crucible of loss and pain, a face that Peter's would become if he'd seen Ray die instantly and watched Egon die lingeringly, leaving him behind and helpless to save them.

"Oh my god," Peter moaned, cold and numb to the core. "You're—"

"I'm you. What you'll become. I'm sorry. But I had to come. It was the only thing left, the only hope I've got to put it right."

"Dreaming into the future?" Peter hazarded, stunned at how numb he felt. "How long...?"

"Five years." His shoulders slumped. "I've been trying to find a way to undo it for five impossible years. I spent most of the first one in and out of the hospital; the doctors said I didn't want to live, but I lived anyway. I might have died if it hadn't been for Winston; once he caught me with a bottle of pills and took them away. I hadn't taken them, but I kept thinking of it. I kept remembering Egon and the way the light went out of his eyes. God, Peter, he was alert in there, trapped in a shattered body that didn't work. He couldn't talk, couldn't respond, barely could blink in answer to me. He couldn't breathe on his own. They knew they couldn't save him, but they tried. It was a cheat; he always knew they couldn't save him. He didn't hope for it. I sat in there with him every day and listened to the stupid noise the respirator made, and talked to him. I was crazy with pain but I didn't care. I fought them so hard they brought me every day. I think they knew I wouldn't stop fighting unless they drugged me unconscious. I couldn't leave him alone like that, trapped inside himself. Winston was here, he was always here, but Egon needed me. We...tried not to tell him about Ray, but he knew. I could see it in his eyes. He knew he was dying, too. He couldn't talk to me, he could only listen. I had to be there. It was the only thing I could do for him." It was as if he'd bottled up every emotion he'd felt since the explosion, waiting to let it loose, and he'd been unable to do that, even with Winston, until he faced his younger, untouched self, the only one who would understand completely what he had endured, what he had given his life over to changing.

Peter stared at him in sheer apprehension, listening to the nightmare future that awaited him, hearing his own words in that strange tortured voice describing an unendurable life. The newspaper in his hand was a confirmation of his future self's words, spelled out in black and white. He skimmed the first few paragraphs, about how an untested device had blown up in the lab, starting a fire, how Peter had fought the fire and dragged Egon out, burning himself severely in the process. Winston, who had been downstairs, raced up with a fire extinguisher and made it to Ray, but Ray had died instantly in the explosion. He had taken the full force of the blast; the reporter indicated he'd had an instant's warning and had thrown himself between Egon and the device in an attempt to save him. The words were stark and bare, but Peter felt them as if each one was a lash against his back.

"Janine went away for a long time, but Winston and I kept the firehouse," his doppelganger continued. "We had to maintain the containment unit. We didn't bust ghosts any more. I'm not up to it." He gestured wryly at his ruined body. "So Winston trained some younger guys and they do the work because it still needs doing even if I can't do it. But I kept hoping I could find a way to...undo it. To make it unhappen. To get them back."

Until he finished, Peter hadn't realized how tightly he'd been wound up. "Undo it?" he shouted. "I can undo it? There's a chance to stop it? I can get them back?"

"Why else do you think I'm here, Peter? I tried everything. I studied physics, engineering, quantum mechanics, time travel theories, anything. Then I went on to parapsychology, then to astral projection, all the new age psychobabble I could find, mysticism, the occult. There had to be a way to prevent it, to go into the past and change time. For years I tried. Everybody gave up on me, even Dad, everybody but Winston and Janine; they stood by me; I'd have gone crazy without them. Maybe I am crazy, I don't know. But then, a few months ago, I remembered the Alpha-wave generator. I was wearing it when the lab blew up so it hadn't been damaged. The dream state is a receptive one. I remembered I'd had a fall the day before the explosion. I'd been sleeping with the helmet on and I just slept too late. If I could link up with you there, I could warn you, make you wake up in time to do something, to stop it."

Peter's mouth fell open in stunned realization. "Now! It's gonna happen now?!" His eyes went to the newspaper, saw the date. It was today's. "Omigod, I've gotta go after them!" He hesitated for one last second, reaching out to grab the dream visitor's shoulders and squeeze them with fervent gratitude. "Thanks isn't enough for what you've gone through and what you've saved for me. If I can do it, it won't happen. I promise you, guy. I promise." And he knew the promise he made was every bit as fierce and heartfelt as his other self's determination to save his lost friends.

"Good luck," his other self called, the words echoing as the table retreated into the darkness. "Good luck. Good luck. Save them, Peter. Save them...."

Peter bolted out of bed, frantically tearing off the helmet. "Winston, bring the fire extinguisher," he bellowed, causing Zeddemore to drop his book and lunge to his feet.

"Pete? What the heck...?"

"Fire extinguisher. Now!"

Peter ran for the lab like a man possessed, saw Egon and Ray bent over the small device. Its screen was blinking, the lights vivid and bright. Peter didn't know what time the explosion had taken place, whether he had seconds or hours, but it didn't matter. Instead he knocked the thing from Egon's hands, grabbed each man by an arm and yanked them to their feet with brute strength enhanced by sheer adrenaline. "Trust me, move! I know what I'm doing. Out of here! Now!"

He chivvied them toward the door, following them, pushing them toward safety, frantic to move them, and it was a sign of the team's ability to work together without the need of explanations that they let him urge them from the room. He enforced the urgency with a gabbled explanation. "It's gonna blow. Move, guys. It's gonna—"

The explosion rocked the whole building, staggering him as he tried to keep his balance. Fire and smoke were instantaneous, even as he and the two men he had rushed to rescue were flung to the floor of the hall. Peter landed hard, the wind driven from his body, barely conscious that he had steered his fall to shield his two friends, still struggling to protect them with his own body as plaster and rubble pounded them, and Winston, yelling, ran against the force of the blast, fire extinguisher in his hands.

"Janine!" Zeddemore screamed at the top of his lungs. "Call 911!"

Something slammed into Peter, crashing against the back of his head with what felt like appalling force.

The world ended.

Peter woke to the sounds of Egon muttering worried words. "I knew the power level was too high, Ray. Peter, wake up, please. You're all right. Come on, Peter, wake up." Hands gripped his shoulders, fingers checked his pulse.

The sound of that deep voice, alive, in control, unhurt, roused Peter from his momentary blackout faster than anything else could have done. He looked around urgently, the gesture causing a momentary dizziness that passed almost before he felt it. He spotted Ray staring wide-eyed into the ruin of the lab, Janine fussing over Egon and trying to put a bandage on a small cut on his forehead, and Winston powering down the fire extinguisher. His head hurt, and he suspected his earlier bruises had produced considerable offspring, but aside from a new, dull ache in the back of his head, he seemed intact. "Did I do it?" he demanded. "Did I save your lives?"

"We're alive, Peter, thanks to you," Egon said, staring at him with a wondering respect. "How did you know it was going to explode."

"I told myself," Peter said. He sat up shakily. Although there was no further evidence of dizziness, his muscles ached too much to move abruptly. "God, Egon, that guy, the scarred guy, he was me."

"I wondered," Egon replied. "Based on your instinctive response to him, and ours to the shadowy figure on the tape, I knew he was important. That's why I felt you had to return to the dreamscape. I didn't quite realize he was a future you, but it was a possibility that almost crystallized. And besides, he wouldn't have given a reading apart from your own. I wasn't reading an invader in your dream, I was evidently reading a second Peter. No wonder the biorhythms were elevated."

"Thank god I went in again," Peter breathed, still shaken. "He came in too late the first time around; he didn't have any warning. The EAE blew up and he was wearing the gizmo, just like I still would be if he hadn't intervened. He didn't reach them in time; the explosion woke him up and the damage was already done when he arrived on the scene. He dragged you out, Egon, but you were hurt too badly to live. You were alert, but your body was beyond fixing, and he sat with you for weeks in the hospital, watching you die." He shivered. "Just listening to him tell about it... god, I'm so glad it didn't happen. Ray was dead right away. He tried to save you, jumped in front of you and took the full blast and was killed instantly." Peter looked up at the shocked Ray, relieved to find him whole. "My, uh, future self was pretty badly burned. But he lived. He acted like living was a curse but he took it like a punishment. I—he was so bitter, and so desperate. He studied everything he could think of, to find a way to reverse it and change history, to bring you back. He finally thought of using the Alpha wave generator. He traveled in time by controlling the dream. I think he could only come when I was in it alone, and that's the only time I was. He remembered it, remembered sleeping in because of it, and being just a second too late to save you." He was shaking as he spun out the story, aware of the shocked stares of his friends as they gathered around him to listen, grateful beyond words for their presence and the comforting hands they rested on his shoulders and back as he talked.

"You couldn't have saved us if it really had happened," Egon said as if he realized Peter was prepared to assume his alter ego's guilt for failing to save his friends. "You would have had no way of knowing. You wouldn't have been to blame, but knowing you as I do, you wouldn't have believed that. This was the only way he could prevent it, by undoing it. And it's just like you to try."

Peter nodded. "He didn't know it would be so hard. I think it was only because he wanted it so desperately that he could do it. I don't think we could dream our way into the past and stop the Pan Am 103 bombing or the assassination of JFK."

"No," agreed Egon. "It wasn't even because he wanted it so much, not entirely. It was because he was you, Peter, and because you care so strongly about your friends."

"Gosh, Peter, you saved us," Ray said in an awed voice. "You and the other Peter." He squeezed Peter's shoulder as if he could understand the trauma of the dreamscape.

"He had help," Peter said quickly. "Winston and Janine stood by him. They believed in him." He smiled at the secretary and the black man with open affection. "Thanks, both of you. I know you don't have to do it now, I know it's sort of, well, unhappened. But the me that would have been couldn't have survived without you."

"Teamwork, Peter," said Winston quickly. "That's what made it work. That and the fact that you're probably the stubbornest man I know." He looked past them at the ruin of the lab. "The fire's out, but we're gonna have to do major repairs in there."

"Buildings can be fixed," Peter said. "Buddies can't, always. Thank goodness this time they could." He pulled himself to his feet and went to Egon, hugging him tightly for a moment, then did the same to Ray, relieved beyond belief that he didn't have to live through what his other self had endured. He didn't even want to imagine life without his oldest friends.

"I wonder if he remembered," Winston mused, eyeing the still shaking Peter, who was only beginning to regain his equilibrium. "I wonder if he woke up and it was like it had never happened."

"Yeah," said Ray. "I hope he had a few minutes to realize what he'd done, how much he'd achieved for his friends."

Peter saw a gleam in Ray's eyes and knew Ray was thinking the present Peter would have done exactly the same thing. *I would, too*, he thought. "I don't know, Ray. In a way I hope he woke up and found you guys all around him and it was like it never happened. Even if the memory went away right away, two seconds of it would have been two too many. I hope I never see that expression on my face if I live to be a hundred years old." He shivered. "I never want to become that version of me, guys. Think we could work out a means of immortality?"

"I think we should work on the Alpha-wave generator," Egon replied. "I suspect it has potential we've never tapped. I'll want to study the tape of your morning session, Peter, to see if it was any clearer than last night's. It's possible there may be intriguing applications we have yet to explore."

"It wasn't," Winston replied. "I could see Pete moving and talking but I still couldn't see the other him."

"Maybe the dream couldn't project both of them vividly," Egon theorized. "It will prove a fascinating study, however. Perhaps one of us could try tonight to go back into an earlier session of the dream, simply to see if it could be done."

"Oh, no," Peter groaned, though the sight of Egon in full cry touched something inside of him that had begun to shrivel as he'd listened to his older self's story of Egon's lingering death. He could feel himself uncurling like a flower in the sun at the very sight and sound of Egon's scientific fascination and the way Ray caught it from him.

"I can see it now," Peter said with a huge grin. "Time Travelers 'R Us. I'm not doing it. I'm not going back in time, never again. Least I hope I never have to. I'm glad the other me did it, but I think we should leave messing with the timeline to Doctor Who and Sapphire and Steel and characters like that. It's their job." He draped his arms around Egon and Ray's shoulders. "As for me, I'm gonna settle for being a Ghostbuster. As long as I've got my friends on my team."

A distant siren announced the arrival of firemen or paramedics either in response to the explosion itself or to a call made by one of the team or Janine while Peter had been momentarily stunned. He cocked his head, listening, then he turned to Egon. "You've gotta promise me something, Spengs," he said urgently.

"What, Peter?"

"Next time you don't like the way a ghost smells—"

"Yes, Peter?" Egon's eyes began to sparkle. He knew what was coming; they all did.

Janine started giggling, and Egon and Ray exchanged an amused look, then nodded in unison as if, they, too, could see into the future, at least enough for what was coming.

Peter's grin spread from ear to ear. "Hold your breath."

The future Peter opened his eyes and blinked dazedly at his two allies. "I reached him," he breathed, looking up at Winston, who stood over him, watching him anxiously. Janine moved in from the foot of the bed, holding her breath. "I told him, guys," Peter exulted. "He knows. I did it. He knows."

"Way to go, m'man," lauded Winston, almost sounding like the Winston of old. "Way to go." He raised his hand for an automatic high five, clapping his palm against Peter's unscarred hand.

"What will happen?" Janine asked. "Did it...work? How will we know..."

"I don't know." Peter glanced around the bunkroom at the two beds, spotting no change. Maybe he had been too late. Maybe it hadn't worked after all. "We have to give it time."

"Time?" Winston shook his head with a deep sympathy. "We're at the other end of time, Pete. There's plenty of time between. We'd know by now, wouldn't we?"

Peter sat up, the flesh of his burned

shoulder pulling at the unwary motion. He'd learned over the years to start out more slowly, to move with a prudent caution, because otherwise it would hurt. He didn't mind the pain, in a way. He felt he owed it to Egon and Ray for living when they were gone, but...

"That's funny," Janine said in a very surprised voice.

"Funny?" echoed Winston, staring at her. Following her gaze he stared down at Peter, and the psychologist frowned as he noticed the grey in Winston's hair seemed far less noticeable this morning than it had when he'd gone to sleep last night. "s he watched the rest of it faded until he couldn't see any at all.

"Your hair," Peter started, putting out his left hand, then he drew it to him and frowned as the puckered skin smoothed out, healing, the scars vanishing before his eyes, leaving a normal hand in its place. Stunned, he reached up to touch his face, and found smooth, unmarred flesh under the morning's beard stubble. Smooth flesh... "What the hell..?"

Janine's eyes were huge. "Egon?" she breathed, gazing around the room, past Peter's bed to the neatly made one beside it that hadn't been there seconds before. They all turned to stare at Ray's bed, mysteriously returned as well. "Egon!" Janine's joyful scream was instantly followed by thudding footsteps in the hall, and a moment later Egon and Ray burst into the room. They were a little older than Peter remembered them, but they were intact, alive, in one piece—here.

"Oh, god," Peter moaned. Energy flooded his body, his healthy body. With a glad cry he launched himself from bed and flung his arms around his two long-lost friends as if he would never let go. "You're alive. You're alive!"

"Of course we're alive, Peter," Egon's deep voice rumbled in his ear as he patted the shaken Peter on the back. "What's wrong? Did the Alpha-wave generator backfire on you and give you a nightmare?"

"Yeah, Peter, you sound a little confused," Ray agreed.

Peter freed himself from the two men and blinked at them doubtfully. A second earlier there had been an urgency, a hollow need inside him that would never be filled, followed by a happiness too intense to contain within himself, but now it was gone. He scarcely remembered it, the desperation and need had faded, and in its place was a sense of contentment he couldn't explain, a quiet joy. Glancing sideways at Winston, he saw him returning the look in equal, if momentary doubt, then Egon bent over the generator, and Ray grinned at Janine with great interest.

"What are you doing up here, Janine? Watching Peter get his beauty sleep? Not that he looks particularly great in the mornings, I'll give you that, but if you're not careful, you're gonna make Egon jealous."

Egon's head came up in a combination of amusement and alarm, then he exchanged a smile with Janine that didn't display a trace of jealousy.

"Die, Stantz," Peter retorted with a huge grin, then he caught himself as if the words held a hidden meaning he didn't remember. For an instant he hesitated then, when Ray gave him a jab in the ribs, he burst out laughing and lunged at him to retaliate. He couldn't remember ever feeling so good, so fulfilled, so free.

"Please, children, not while I'm working," chided Egon as he rewound the tape. "I want to watch this. From your reaction just now, Peter, I believe I have an idea what's on this tape."

Memory kicked in and suddenly his reactions made a kind of sense. "Omigosh," he breathed. "I've got it! The dream into the past! I forgot all about it. You mean this is the day I went back into my long-ago dream and changed history and saved you guys from that lab explosion?" Suddenly he understood it all, the reason he'd lunged for the guys like that, the reason he felt so good. Because it hadn't happened; he'd changed the past, he'd saved them.

"Hey, yeah." Ray grinned. "I forgot all about it after all these years. Gosh, Peter, you don't still remember the other version, now that we've caught up to it, do you?' He leaned closer and touched him on the arm. 'I remember when you told us what the other you was like. Gosh, those memories wouldn't be good ones."

"I think I did remember when I woke up, but it just...melted away." Reminded of what had happened so long ago, the strange dreams he'd had, the warning from his future self, he gave both his 'resurrected' friends another hug for good measure, then, content in the knowledge that his life was just the way he wanted it, he asked, "So whose turn is it to make breakfast?"

POSSESSION

T.Beaty

She watched the blond man disappear through the door, something tugging at her heart. She wished...she wished he would....

Janette shook her head and laughed at her foolishness, tossing her head to let the loose hair swing in a bold gesture. The strands floated like silk across her neck, soft as a lover's caress, a lover's kiss....

She frowned at herself and turned back to the bar, upset at her wonderings. At her foolishness. She glanced around the club, noting the emptying corners, the uncrowded dance floor. Ah, nearly closing time. Good. She took one of the empty seats at the bar, feeling her muscles pull tightly around her bones. She concentrated, trying to push the tension out and down through her chair, to relax.

Right.

Alma appeared beside her. "Why don't you do something about it?"

She raised an eyebrow in question. "Hmm? About what?"

"Him." Alma nodded towards the door. "Nick."

"And what should I do?" Janette tapped the bar with one manicured finger.

"If he's that much of a problem, cut him out. It's not like you'll really die. You'll get over him, right?"

Miklos slid a full glass in front of Janette, and she nodded gratefully at the bartender. He nodded back, eyes unreadable, and leaned casually against the wall, facing her. His expression betrayed nothing.

She took a sip. "I would, in time."

"So why don't you?"

Janette stared at her glass, watching the faint light refract from the surface of the deep red liquid. "You wouldn't understand, Alma."

"Why do you stick with him, anyway? For the memories? For the past?"

She smiled sadly, wistfully. "No," she said softly. "If it were for the past, he would have gone long ago."

"You want him, don't you."

She told herself firmly not to react. She didn't turn towards him, but moved her face slightly, tilting it in his direction, acknowledging his presence. "He is quite handsome. As are the others."

"Yes." His hands came to rest on her shoulders, settling with the weight of a large bird of prey. "But he is the one you want."

She shrugged.

His voice purred in her ear, closer. "He is a crusader, you know. A knight. Just returned."

She was careful to keep her voice flat, careless. "Indeed."

"His name is Nicholas."

"Of?"

He laughed. "Will it really matter?"

She shook her head, slowly, her eyes still on the group of young men in the center of the hall. They laughed at some joke, their heads tilting, great roars of sound bursting from their throats. She watched them, fascinated. The light gleamed from the bits of armor they'd yet to take off, the firelight glinting off the shining metal and their leader's golden hair. She turned to look at Lacroix, catching herself before she could flinch at the sight of his eyes. He didn't look at her, staring only at the young knight, eyes intent upon that one's figure. They, too, were golden, flickering with all the hues of the fire in the hearth.

"Men never matter," she said.

He laughed, and she shivered at the sound, the throatiness that gently scraped at her skin. He smiled at her. "You amuse me, Janette." His smile widened. "And, because you amuse me so well, I will allow you to amuse yourself. With him."

She cocked her head. "I did not realize I needed your permission to take someone," she said archly.

The hands were heavier on her shoulders, grinding her down to her bones. "He's mine, Janette," Lacroix said, still staring at the young man. "Be careful you do not kill him in your games. He's mine."

She heard him come in the door, slowly, hesitantly, as if unsure of what he'd find. She opened her eyes and watched him blink, walk forward, and stumble. She didn't move from her place by the window, where she was wreathed by the shadows that cloaked the land outside.

His head turned from side to side, and she knew he'd sensed her. Even without knowing how, he knew she was there. "Janette?"

"You'll become used to it," she said, turning back to the view.

He came to stand behind her, and she could feel him, waiting. There, at her back, where, if she closed her eyes, she could feel something–not the golden aura that had crowned him as a human, but something still more comforting than the implacable presence of Lacroix.

"Become used to what?"

"Seeing in the night. Your mind does not accept what your eyes see. We all go through it. We all become accustomed to it quickly."

"What if I do not want to learn this thing?"

She shrugged. "You will, whether you wish to or not."

There was silence, and then she heard him shift from one foot to another. "I do not wish to," he said quietly.

She said nothing. What was there to say?

She felt his forehead touch the back of her neck, his hands creep up to clasp her about the waist. He held on to her tightly, rubbing his forehead against her skin, as though to rub off some pain. "Take me back," he whispered, his breath skimming along her flesh, tickling it. "Take me back, Janette. Please."

She closed her eyes. "I...cannot."

"Please, Janette, I beg you."

"It is too late for that."

He lifted his head, though his hands remained about her waist. "So Lacroix told me."

"Do not go against his wishes, Nicholas. He is your master now."

"My master?" His tone was half-amused, half unbelieving. "There was a time I called no man master, save my king and my God."

"Now you need pay respects to none."

"Save Lacroix, of course."

She nodded curtly.

He let her go and came to stand beside her, to stare at the night outside. "He owns me now."

"He owns us both."

"And yet you led me into this knowingly. You knew what would happen to me, and still you allowed it."

"I had no choice," she said evenly.

He smiled, sad and lost all at once. "Neither did I."

The knowledge whispered to her, as always, waking her from her troubled sleep. The sun, poised on the edge between the two worlds, would soon rise from the netherworld and unfurl its rays over the land, chasing the darkness before it. She sighed.

Then she frowned. The bed beside her was empty, no body sprawled across the sheets. Fear shot through her. Lacroix would never forgive her for losing Nicholas so soon! A new vampire, hungry, alone—

As she rose in a flurry of sheets, she realized that no, she was not alone in the room. Nicholas was still there, standing by the window. She blinked and opened her mouth, to call him back to the bed—

His sudden scream made her fight her way from under the covers, heedless of her nudity. She was across the room in an eyeblink, but she feared even that was too long. She darted carefully in the shadows, accompanied by his screams. Hurry. Hurry. She made her way to the heavy wooden shutters and slammed them shut, dropping the bar across it with a loud thump. She turned back to Nicholas, taken aback by the sounds coming from his throat, raw and fear-filled. His fingers tore at his face as his legs buckled under him. She knelt and grabbed his hands, pulling them away from his face with an effort. "Shhh," she soothed. "Nicholas, let me see–"

She bit back her words when she saw the burns. His eyes stared wildly at her, through her, and she knew he was blind, that he saw nothing. She touched his face carefully. "Quiet, Nicholas. They will heal in little time. You did no permanent damage, despite your best efforts."

He writhed on the floor. "It hurts!"

"I thought I told you about the sunlight! It kills, Nicholas! Did you think I was joking last night? What do you think you were doing?"

Nicholas quieted on the floor, and his face turned towards her, sightless eyes gazing at nothing. "I wanted to see the sunrise," he said softly, and she froze, hand going to her mouth. "I wanted to see the sun. I've seen it so many times before, you know. But...I don't remember it. I never really saw it." His head drooped to his chest. "I wanted to see the sun again."

"Oh, Nicholas.... You cannot." She shook her head, forgetting that he couldn't see.

"I wanted to see the sun. Last night...you took something from me, you and Lacroix. I could feel it go, but I didn't know what it was. I still don't. I know something's missing, but I cannot tell what it is." His face turned towards her. "Is this what being a vampire is like, Janette? This...loss? Will I feel like this forever? You and Lacroix, you promised me everthing...but I can no longer feel anything. You've taken that part of me away."

"You are better now," she urged, frightened by his words. By his instant understanding of the truth she had struggled with so long, had hidden between Lacroix's riddles of words and the half-truths they lived by. "You have merely lost your mortality."

"My mortality." He smiled bitterly. "My humanity, you mean."

"You will not die," she insisted, ignoring the cold flagstones that pressed into her flesh.

"I already did." His voice was sad and lost. "Who am I now, Janette?"

"You are Nicholas."

"And who is he? No longer Nicholas of Brabant, for he was mortal. No longer son to my father or my mother. No longer a knight of the crusade. No longer man."

"You are a vampire. Is that not enough?"

"You tell me, Janette. Who were you, before? Did you have another name? Live another life, perhaps? Of course. Tell me, Janette, who did you leave behind? What life? What other person–"

"Dead." Her voice was flat and cutting. "She is dead."

"As I am." He looked down, sightless eyes staring. "And now, all I had, all I was–gone. I am Lacroix's. Nothing else. Not lover, not son, not friend. I am simply...Lacroix's."

She kissed him then, leaning forward to stop the breath, the heart, the forbidden words. She thrust her tongue into his mouth and swallowed all the sounds, all the memories, all the pain. It was better that he should not say the words. Better. She kissed him and stole away the words.

And later, when he cried tears that streamed down his burnt face, she stole those too.

"My lady?"

She blinked, eyelids fluttering against some surface. Her cheek was pressed against something smooth and cool. She raised her head.

Miklos nodded at her, wiping down the clean glasses. She looked around.

"We've closed," he said. "It's late."

"Alma?" Her mouth was dry.

He stopped and, bending down, set her unfinished glass in front of her. "You obviously weren't interested in talking. I suggested she help lock up." His face hinted only cool disinterest. "Dreams?"

"Memories." She took a healthy swallow.

"Good ones?"

"In the past. Where they belong."

"Where you can forget."

"No." She smiled humourlessly. "Not us."

He tilted his head at her. "Where you can forgive, then."

"Sometimes you can't." She traced the rim of her glass with a finger. "And sometimes...you shouldn't."

"It hurts to hold onto it, though."

"Sometimes it's all you have!" She shrugged.

"It still hurts, though."

"We are responsible for our own actions," she said slowly, "but sometimes we have to accept that the consequences are not...of our choosing."

Miklos watched her, eyes calm. "You should tell him that."

"Who?"

"Nick."

She stammered, her mouth opening and closing. He shrugged and picked up another glass.

"We have to make our own choices," he said. His eyes were still on her. "Eventually." He set the last glass down with a sharp click and raised one eyebrow. "I'm finished here. Need anything else?"

His hand settled gently over hers.

She stared at his hand. What would her life be, without Nicholas? Without his voice, his touch? No love, no laughter, without him. Without his golden beauty to keep back the darkness, to stand beside her in the night. Without him, there would only be the night. There would only be Lacroix.

Who would wipe her tears away?

Janette looked up at Miklos, gently sliding her hand out from under his. "No, thank you." She smiled, a sad, sweet smile. No tears. She owed them to Nicholas. She could give him back that one thing, that thing that was hers to give. "I'll be fine."

Miklos nodded and left, and she remained, alone in the bar, sipping at her drink, feeling the rising of the sun outside. There were no tears.

CORELLIANS AIN'T TAME

Z.P.Florian

Ignoring the cold wind that blew through his ragged clothes, Han Solo stood quietly in front of the wire gate, while Toplord Tarplathan explained to the new Downlord how to keep and maintain a Corellian. Since they spoke in Ganvoan, Han understood very little of the lecture. He was outside, his security collar effectively preventing him from entering the inner compound: the two Ganvoans stood within, the Toplord explaining, the Downlord taking notes.

"A good manager knows that the best mechanics and pilots are Corellians. It is wise to keep one, but you must be exceedingly careful in handling them," Tarplathan said. "I've lost quite few before I've learned my lesson. They are clever for a Standard Human, but it would be no use to try and teach them discipline. Standard Humans are purely instinctive creatures, and Corellians are the worst. They never cease to try for an escape. Whatever they do, it is always oriented towards this single goal. Like the wild truccat of the Ganvoan desert, they constantly claw at the walls, unable to understand the futility of it. Still, they can be useful and can be kept relatively content. Of course, he must be confined—he is quite strong and would attack at the first chance."

A flexible green digit pointed at Han, as the Toplord continued his explanation. "I have him manacled to the controls at the beginning of his shift."

Han saw the Downlord's large white eyes focusing on the bloody rags on his wrists.

"Oh, yes," Tarplathan remarked. "This one is treated well. I allow him to use padding under his manacles. Obviously, they wouldn't chafe his wrist if he wouldn't tug on them, but you see, their sense of self-preservation is remarkably limited. Ganvish science pointed this out long ago. "

"Is this one a particularly savage specimen?" the Downlord asked.

"I'd say. He had made several attempts to remove his collar and received punishment, yet there is no sign that he has learned anything from it. He still keeps trying."

"What would be the benefit in getting rid of his collar?"

Tarplathan clicked his fangs. "He could then get into the restricted areas, get weapons, try to escape, or steal food. Ah, the feeding is difficult. This one notices immediately when there is Human flesh in his food and refuses to eat it. He is too primitive to understand the practicality of slave recycling. But a few days of fasting doesn't affect his primitive metabolism at all."

"May I ask you to demonstrate how the collar works?" the Downlord inquired curiously.

Han understood the question and fought against his desperate impulse to run. This was not worth provoking more punishment, he knew. He had to take it.

"Step ahead," Tarplathan commanded in Spaceint.

Han took a deep breath and moved forward, between the sensors. He fell on his knees instantly, jerking in pain, unable to crawl away, taking shock after shock, choking on his own screams.

"Now, you can either push him outside, out of sensor range, or wait 'til he loses consciousness and the sensors stop the punishment automatically," the Toplord explained.

"Would it start again, when he comes to?"

"Naturally, as long as his collar is within the range." Tarplathan surveyed the convulsing body. "See how sturdy he is? A delicate, intelligent being like us would be unconscious already, but his system is undeveloped and not sensitive. All right, he's out." The Toplord extended a long green leg and rolled Han's body out onto the concrete. "There is no permanent damage, except a few bruises and cuts he inevitably acquires with all the trashing around. How familiar are you with Standard Humans?"

The Downlord admitted that he had not seen too many of them.

"Ah. The red wetness on his face is his blood, the same thing the spiceworms feed on. Of course Corellians are too valuable to be sent into the caves to nourish the worms. The other body fluid has no value for us, it's part of his digestive system, but he usually releases it whenever the collar is activated."

"Rather unclean species," the Downlord said with disgust.

"Ah, yes, soft and sticky, and seems to attract dirt." Toplord Tarplathan looked at his own spotless green body with pride. "Isn't Ganvish great? But this is enough for now. We still have to see the spice collecting . "

They left the platform long before Han came to. He didn't even move at first, just lay there, enjoying the absence of the pain. When he sat up, a trickle of blood ran down his face and he licked at it; the salty taste felt good in his dry mouth.

Slowly, he got to his feet, amazed how could they support him still. Obviously, the pain of the shocks was more illusory than real, and if he could convince himself to stand it....

He shivered at the thought and pushed it away for now. Straightening his back, he went to the empty crate that served as his "cabin". His bed was a pile of old spice sacks. He fell asleep before he could do as much as cover himself with one.

Another goddamn morning. Han crawled out of his crate and cursed himself for all kinds of bastard, because he could barely keep himself from running to the gate to see if he'd get anything edible. His food was brought to him in a bowl by a low-ranking Ganvoan, who also measured out a bottle of blue water for the day.

Han looked into the bowl; it appeared to contain soup with a round little bread soaking in it. Whatever the soup was made of, he had no way of knowing. His stomach contracted with hunger first, then with nausea, as he remembered the human toenails in yesterday's stew.

"You eat, silly human," the Ganvoan said with affection. He developed an attachment to the Corellians who served here, nearly grieving for each and every one when they died. This Hansolo was just as wild and absurdly untamable as the others, but the Ganvoan handled him as one would handle a dangerous pet, knowing that as long as he was inside and Han outside, he was perfectly safe. He hoped that one day, he'd train the Human to eat out of his hand. Now he offered the food by pushing the bowl across the gate, on the floor. "Eat!"

"Not if it is left over from yesterday, " Han grated.

"Gizgaz soup," the Ganvoan told him. "Come on, say it: gizgaz soup. It's good Ganvish grass."

For all Han knew, the Ganvoan could have been lying, but his hunger was desperate and this was food. He finished it to the last drop, wiping the bowl clean with the soggy bread.

"Good human," the Ganvian praised him, taking the bowl. "Now, go to your place."

His "place" was at the controls of the delivery snake, an ancient, rickety jet, with several elongated cars attached to it. The cars were loaded with sacks of spice twice a day, and he drove them through half of the moon's surface to the spaceport.

An eighteen-hour day. He couldn't even sit down, tied as he was to the control panel; the chains allowed little movement. Any sudden jerk of the shuttle and the binders tore bloody furrows into his wrists.

Damn that he had nothing to do anything with—except his damn body, and even that threatened to betray him, with pains and fevers and gnawing hunger. He couldn't live his life here, chained, manacled, beaten and alone. A year or so and he'd try to kiss the feet of the Ganvoan who fed him.

He was fairly sure that once he was inside the compound, nobody could stop him from getting his hands on a weapon and shooting his way to the nearest spaceship. And if he got killed in the attempt, at least he'd die a free man, instead of slowly degenerating into something only a Ganvoan could love.

If he could only bring himself to stand the pain.

By the end of his eighteen hours he'd managed to convince himself to give it a try in the morning. The manacles snapped open and he staggered outside, the cold wind biting into his flesh. He was so hungry he thought he'd never fall asleep, but he was out like a light as soon as he crawled to his place.

The Ganvoan stood at the gate in the morning with the usual bowl of food, beckoning him with soft clicking sounds, but Han looked past the bowl, ignoring the demanding emptiness in his stomach, concentrating on the stubby blaster strapped to the Ganvoan's broad back. All he had to do was to burst through the gate and grab it. His eyes flew to the control boxes and for a split second, he was paralyzed with fear. He forced out a vicious curse and leaped; the pain was a flash of lightning inside him, but his momentum took him past the controls and he slammed into the Ganvoan, forcing it back, grabbing for the blaster in a blur of Ganvish claws and spilled swill. His fingers fastened on the weapon, tearing it out of the holster and firing at the same time. The Ganvoan gave a shrill cry and backed away, obviously hurt, but not incapacitated. Han didn't care; without slowing down, he raced across the platform, through a set of swinging doors, down a long green hallway, barely hearing the alarms blaring behind him.

Two Ganvoans blocked the end of the hall, firing stun shots at him, and Han zigzagged like mad to avoid them. A shot brushed his left leg, not enough to slow him down. He got one of the Ganvoans and the other backed off, shrieking. Cowards, Han grinned tightly, as he broke through the door, into a mess hall full of Ganvoans. He jumped on the long table and run towards the back, avoiding grabbing pincers and a few wide shots; he flew through something he thought was a kitchen, then a storage room, full of crates. He ran, breathing hard, trying to keep the crates between himself and the furiously shooting Ganvoans. Anything but getting stunned, he prayed and got his wish: the shot that slammed into his shoulder was a full-charge, but all he felt was the heat. The pain would come later, he knew, but for the moment, he was still running, hoping he'd make the correct turn when the corridor forked.

He didn't. The next door he broke through took him into a large office, and he found himself facing the Toplord, who appeared just as surprised as Han was.

Han trained the blaster on him.

Toplord Tarplathan was a very wise man—he himself said had so many times—and he did not move.

Han carefully walked around him, gritting his teeth against the increasing pain in his shoulder, a fiery burn that spread downwards, to his elbow and his wrist, so that holding the blaster was sheer agony.

Ganvoans appeared in the doorway, but they made no move, fearing for the life of the Toplord.

Tarplathan chattered in Ganvish. Han understood "control box" but nothing else, and the others left hurriedly. Han looked for a way out. There was a window, looking towards the speeder parking, and he broke it with a blaster shot; three more shots were needed to create a large enough opening and then the weapon beeped empty. Han was almost grateful for it, because he could let it go; his entire right arm burned and shook with pain. He went through the window and raced to the nearest speeder.

He was less than a yard from it when something made him look back. The Toplord stood in the window with a control box in his hand.

"Come back in peace, Hansolo," he yelled.

"Screw yourself!" Han yelled back, leaping for the speeder. He was in it, his good left hand on the stick, when Tarplathan hit the button on the control box.

Han pulled back the stick all the way, and heard the speeder's jets starting up . His vision faded, but he wouldn't let the stick go. The speeder shot across the concrete, past an open gate and over the rocky plateau.

The pain lessened to a point when he could actually think. Range—those things had range. He outraced the pain; it was gone, leaving him with no more than the fire in his right arm, and the old assortment of bruises. Twice, he grinned, twice he had made it, against the controls.

The speeder raced over a vast expanse of barren, rocky plain, and not too far behind him, several vehicles closed in, too far to start shooting yet. He had to find a ship. Couldn't take another shot. *I'm in bad shape,* he thought. His vision blurred and for a moment he wasn't even sure where he was and what he was doing. A shot whizzed past his head, another blazed across the side of the speeder, tilting it badly. Han drove behind a row of tall boulders, heard shots blasting the rocks all around him. He gunned the engine for speed and saw another speeder coming at him from the opposite direction. It was a large vehicle, and even from a good distance Han could see the Toplord in it.

Han had just turned, racing towards the open plain, when the pain of the controls hit him. Tarplathan had brought the control box with him.

Too late, you scaly bastard, Han hissed through gritted teeth. *I took it twice, I can take it again. It's not even real pain.* Sheer stubbornness kept him conscious, but the longer he held on, the more bearable the pain appeared. It seared his nerves and shook his body, it raced around inside him, but it made him even more determined to hang on. *They're not gonna get me,* he thought.

There was a sudden, wonderful moment when the pain left him, a moment while a rocky outcropping shielded his speeder, a moment while he could actually think. Inspiration hit him with a bright idea, and he slowed down for a second, hung over the side, pulled the stick back all the way and rolled over, falling hard on the ground, scrambling for cover while the speeder continued full speed into the wide open valley.

Han flattened himself on the ground, fighting for breath.

The speeders continued the chase, racing after the empty vehicle. The Toplord's speeder came closer, bringing the pain, and Han bit the bloody rags on his wrist to keep quiet, repeating his mantra: *I can take it, it's not even real, I can take it.*

Tarplathan passed less than twenty yards from the rocks Han was hiding behind; the pain peaked to a white-hot burn but Han hung onto of his consciousness with a desperation that fed on the very pain he felt. *Go ahead and hurt me, fucker, I'm not giving up.*

Han heard himself praying. *Mother of Corell, remember your sons in their darkest hour. Chewie would be delighted,* he thought. He always wanted me to get religion. *if I'm praying, I must be alive. Sort of. Blacked out for a while, probably. Damn cold around here. Where is here, anyways?* He opened his eyes. The darkening sky told him it was nearing night and he was still free. *Never found me,* he thought with triumph. *Now if I could only find myself,* he added with surprising lucidity. His wound hurt steadily, but he had no fever, thanks to the cold winds that had kept his temperature down. Still, he was weak as a day-old nerf, and light-headed with hunger. He wasn't optimistic enough to believe that the Ganvoans had given up on finding him, but they were probably looking for him at all the wrong places.

He got to his feet and made himself walk. It wasn't easy; his body wanted to lie down, curl up and die. *Keep goin',* he growled to himself. *With any luck you can be in Kessel main port by tomorrow, eatin' a decent meal.*

That was a good thing to remember, because the hope of it kept him walking under the black sky. Small lights flickered in the distance—most probably the speeders dispatched to look for him. He stumbled ahead, wondering how far he could get in his condition. His eyes closed, against the harsh wind or out of sheer exhaustion and he slept between staggering steps.

He never noticed the speeder coming at him. It was the voice that shook him out of his mindless march.

"Here, here, Hansolo, good Human, here is your bowl." It was the Ganvoan who used to feed him. "Come here, good Corellian. Look, here is your bowl. Aren't you hungry?"

Sweet Mother Sun, but he was. The bowl danced in front of him, steaming in the cold night air; the smell of the food went straight to his empty stomach and made him tremble. He reached out for it.

"Take, take," the Ganvoan urged him, offering the bowl with one hand, the other holding a control box.

Han took the bowl and raised it to his lips, intent on finishing every drop. There was no shame in it—he needed the strength.

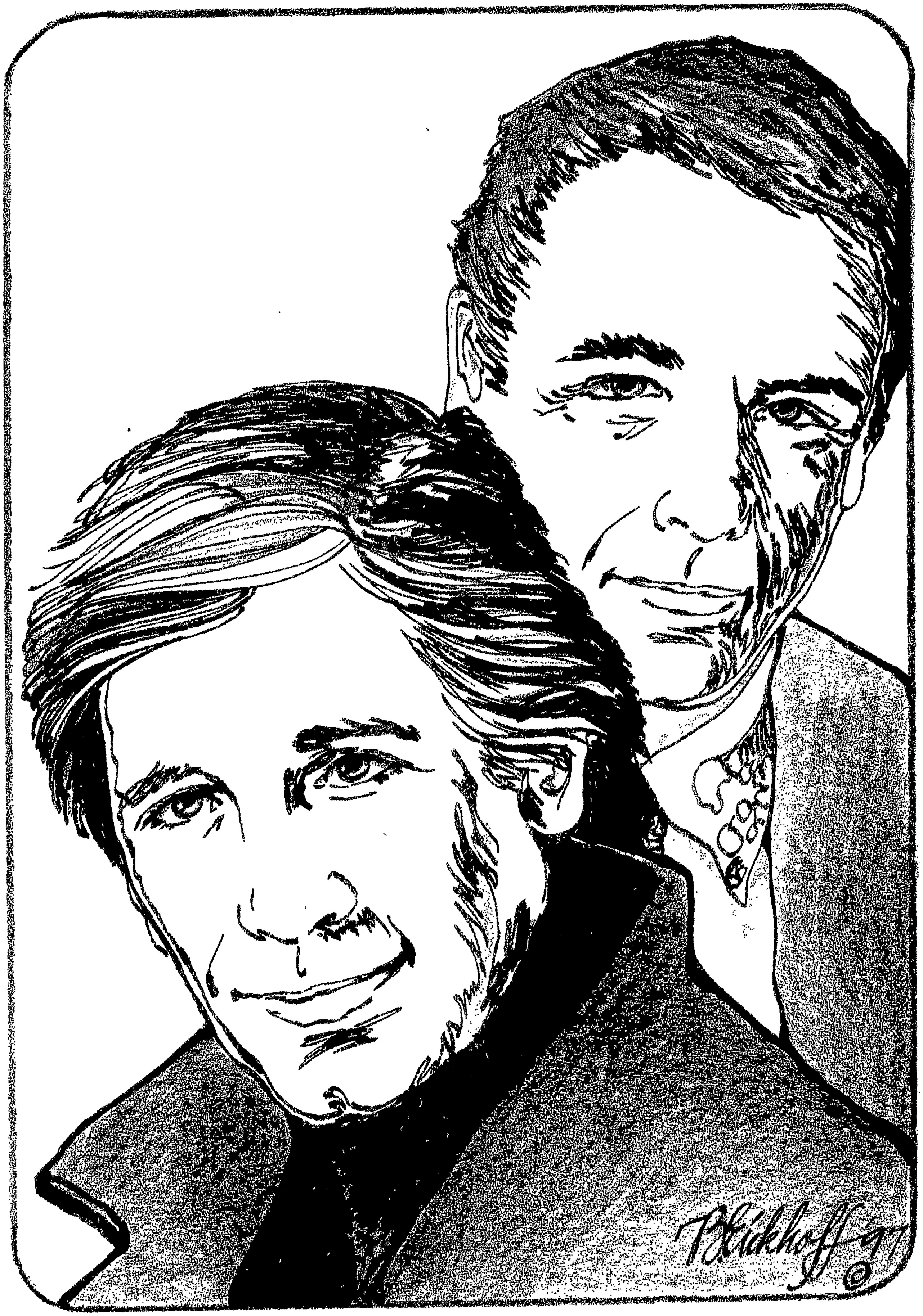
He had barely swallowed the first mouthful when the pain hit. But this time, it only made him angry. There was no trace of reason or humanity left in the starving body that reacted to this insult. The pain became his strength, as he threw himself on the Ganvoan. His hands found the vulnerable neck under the flat scales and he squeezed; the more pain he felt, the harder his squeezing became. The Ganvoan convulsed, thrashing under Han's weight, its claws tearing bloody furrows in his back. But after what seemed like an eternity, it stilled completely.

Han groped blindly for the control box, shutting it off, then he straightened, breathing slowly. In the headlight of the speeder, he saw the bowl, broken to a million pieces on the rocky ground, a few small bones in the puddle of the thin soup. Han's lips moved in the parody of a smile.

"Shall I eat roasted Ganvoan now?" he asked the corpse viciously.

But all he did was pull the dead Ganovan out of the speeder and took his place at the controls. There was a blaster on the other seat, and a varidriver in the toolbox.

That was enough to clear his head. He would be in Kessel port tomorrow, after all.


Blickhoff 97 ©

CONNECTED

Deb Parizek
and Rhonda Hallstrom

Lightning creased the storm-blackened sky. Thunder boomed overhead. Mother Nature sought harmony.

So did Peter Caine.

The serenity of the lake could not reach his soul tonight as it had every other night, to date, of his stay at the temple. The ache in his body, after a long day of training, and the ache in his heart, reason unknown, kept him firmly grounded.

"Am I... invited?" a soft, masculine voice spoke from behind him.

Peter nodded, knowing his father would sense that he was welcome even if the motion made in response to the question was lost in the darkness. Caine seated himself on the grass to his son's right.

"Some herbal tea would ease the soreness of your muscles," Caine offered, starting the conversation. He knew, however, the physical discomfort was not the real problem plaguing his son.

"Yes, I know, Father," Peter replied, quietly.

"I fear, though, the tea will not help the pain in your heart," Caine said. "What troubles you, son?"

"It's nothing. I'll work it out," Peter told his father, eyes never shifting from their hold on the rippling water.

"A wise young man told me once that happiness shared is doubled while sorrow shared is halved..."

"Who was this 'wise young man?'"

"A certain scientist of our acquaintance..."

"Sam." Despite his mood, Peter smiled slightly at the thought of his friend who leapt about in time.

"Yes," Caine replied. "But, let us speak of him later. Will you share your sorrow with me?"

"I might if I knew what was really bothering me," Peter stated. His quiet tone betrayed his feelings of sadness, anger and loss.

"Then you must concentrate on your feelings and bring them into focus," Caine suggested.

"I will try. Will you stay?"

"I will stay."

Peter closed his eyes and reached into himself, endeavoring to find the explanation for how badly he felt. Caine, prepared to wait patiently, sensed his son enter a meditative state...

Peter stood in a gray, formless mist. After a few seconds, a whirlpool of colors surrounded him. He appreciated the beauty of the sight, then his mind imposed order on the maelstrom.

Green settled into grass and leaves. Brown formed tree trunks and an aging building. Blue composed the sky. Yellow, the ambient light.

He stood in bushes at the foot of a tall tree. As soon as he was able, he surveyed the rest of the area, finding himself near a old building. Trees and underbrush encircled the building with the exception of a wide path to the large door on the front face of the structure. Two men crouched behind a large tree just off the path. One man, clad in sand-colored camouflage, sported gray hair. The other, *completely attired in black, had black hair. They seemed familiar.*

Gunfire erupted, breaking the silence. Peter squatted down—force of habit—and searched for those who were armed. His attention was drawn back to the men as he heard the gray-haired one shout.

"Get to the building. I'll cover you."

The black-haired man nodded, reluctantly.

Between bursts of fire from their opponents, the men, like a well-oiled machine, moved in unison. The graying man brought his rifle to bear. An unexpected burst of gunfire resounded.

A round hit the graying man square in the chest and flung him back into his comrade.

"Paul!" Peter yelled as his eyes snapped open.

Caine put a steadying hand on Peter's back. He, too, had experienced his son's vision.

Peter turned a face full of worry to Caine. "I have to help him, Father!" He tried to stand but Caine's hand moved to his shoulder and prevented the movement.

"You cannot—not at this time..." the priest told him.

"Why?" Peter asked, angrily.

Remaining calm in the face of Peter's emotions, Caine said, "You have not completed enough of your training."

"He'll die if I don't help!"

"That is true," Caine agreed, sadness growing in his heart as well. "However, my son, you could not reach him in time. Perhaps, you could ask another to assist your father."

A smile eased the tension on Peter's face. He closed his eyes again...

Blue-white light surrounded him. He felt the wrench of being pulled out of time...

Sam Beckett blinked and staggered as a body was flung right into him. His arms automatically extended to catch the body as he regained his footing. He was dismayed to see blood on his outstretched hand.

"Oh, boy," he moaned as he grabbed the man and dragged him over to a building, keeping low to avoid any bullets.

There is a definition of chaos and Sam was now living it. The minute glances he was able to steal told him that he was in some kind of underdeveloped country during a war. He ducked reflexively as guns fired all around him out in the distance. Sam didn't know what was going on, nor did he really want to get in the middle of it. He had a patient to deal with.

Sam breathed a heavy sigh of relief as he managed to drag the man into a decrepit, rotting building. He knelt down to examine the man more thoroughly, trying to ignore the pain in his left hand—apparently his host had broken a few fingers.

He yanked the shirt open and found that most of the blood belonged to the man lying on the ground, not him. Sam desperately looked around for something clean to make bandages with, but saw nothing. Finally, he stripped off his own shirt and began ripping it up as he heard the familiar sound of the imaging chamber door.

"Sam?" Al's voice called.

"Over here, Al," Sam said, still working. Deliberately, he had dragged the man behind a large pile of rubble.

Al repositioned himself to Sam's side and winced when he saw the wounded man. "Geez, Sam...!" Al moaned, looking away from the gruesome sight. "Why didn't you tell me you were performing surgery?"

"I'm not!" Sam answered disgustedly. "I don't have any supplies for surgery. He's hit bad, Al! He's going to die unless—" The man moaned. "Just what I need," Sam muttered.

"Ryk..." the man moaned.

"Don't talk," Sam said. "Go back to sleep."

"... tell... Annie... and the girls... "

"Just be quiet," Sam reassured him. "I'm going to get you out of this."

"... Peter... tell Peter he's a damn good cop... the best..."

Peter? Sam's swiss-cheesed memory gave him a nudge. *Didn't I know a cop named Peter?*

"... and a damn fine son..." The man coughed weakly and his eyelids fluttered closed.

Peter... Annie... Sam's photographic memory tried to access the names, despite the swiss-cheesing effect. *Oh! Peter Caine! And...this is... this must be Paul Blaisdell!* Sam directed a scathing glare heavenward. *Why can't You ever give me anything easy?*

"What is it, Sam?" Al asked, seeing Sam's expression.

"This is Paul Blaisdell," Sam said, resuming his medical work. "Peter Caine's foster father."

Al's jaw dropped open. "We just can't seem to get away from this family, can we?" he asked sardonically.

"Al," Sam said, "find me the nearest hospital."

Al, after smacking the squealing handlink a couple of times, inputted the question. "Don't you want to know who you are?" he asked between smacks.

"I doubt it'll matter to him," Sam said, indicating the unconscious man, "but go ahead and tell me."

"A mercenary called Ryker. Would you believe we pumped enough truth serum in him to fill a cargo hold and all we got out of him was the name Ryker? I hate these mercenaries!"

Sam smiled, then frowned as his memory jarred loose another fragment from Peter Caine's life. "Kermit!"

Al winced. "Couldja say that a little louder, Sam? I don't think I could hear you over my concussion!"

"Kermit was... is a mercenary, right?" Sam asked.

"Oh, yeah," Al answered sarcastically.

"He knows Blaisdell and probably knows Ryker, too. Al, you've got to give me that name of that hospital!"

"Here it is...El Hospital de los San Juan Marcos; about seven miles that way," Al said, waving his hand to the east.

"Okay," Sam said, as he finished tying off the bandages. "I have to get there to get some supplies or he's going to die." He got up and began rearranging the debris around the fallen man to hide him. "Al, scout outside—see if there's some kind of vehicle around outside, how many men are there, etcetera." Al pushed the handlink buttons and disappeared as Sam continued working. "I hope Blaisdell has the sense to stay put if he wakes up again," Sam muttered to himself.

Just as Sam finished hiding Blaisdell, Al reappeared. "Sam, I found a jeep for you! C'mon!"

Sam peered out the door cautiously. He could see a lot of smoke and hear a lot of gunfire in the distance but didn't see anyone.

Al materialized around the corner to the left and called out, "Sam! Over here!"

Sam ran over to the vehicle at a crouch, just in case people decided to shoot at him again. He looked for keys and found them under the seat. He started the jeep and was off.

Al was waiting for him when he arrived, waving his arms at Sam like an air traffic controller. As Sam got closer, he said, "Sam! I reconnoitered the place—it's a piece of cake. C'mon." As Sam stopped the jeep and clambered out, Al continued. "I found a side door that leads directly to the doctors' lounge and I could only find one doctor in residence."

Sam looked at the small building with hope as Al pointed out the door. *This is a hospital??* Sam thought with disgust. *Only one doctor... I hope they'll have adequate supplies for me to steal...*

He slipped inside without a sound. Thankfully, the doctor wasn't there...and then he saw the door opening...

Sam flattened himself behind the door, reluctantly taking out the gun he had on him and flipping off the safety, praying that he wouldn't have to use it.

The door swung open and covered Sam from sight as the doctor came in and headed straight for the coffee machine. He was in the process of pouring himself a cup when he saw Sam in the reflecting parts of the coffee machine and turned. Sam leveled the gun at him while putting a finger over his lips with his other hand. The doctor slowly put down the cup and raised his hands. Sam closed the door.

"Do you speak English?" Sam asked, gathering from the name of the hospital that he was in Latin America somewhere.

"Si... yes, Senor," the doctor said. He began to approach cautiously. "You are hurt; may I help you?" Sam looked down. He had almost forgotten his host's broken fingers. The doctor took his injured hand gently in his own and examined it briefly. "Senor," he said, "I must tend to this or your hand will never heal properly."

Sam grimaced—he hadn't thought of that.

The doctor misunderstood the emotion. "You are safe here, Senor. There is no need for that gun. We fight for de la pais."

Sam frowned. He didn't catch the Spanish but he still didn't know if that meant he could put down the gun, or even which side he was on.

"Come, let me take care of you."

The doctor took his arm gently and led him out. Sam let him, knowing that the doctor would take him to a treatment room where he could get supplies, but tucked the gun under his coat. The doctor nodded as if he expected Sam to keep hold of the weapon.

Sam was led into the treatment room as he had expected. The doctor began busying himself with bottles and syringes as Sam looked on. Sam decided to not give away his medical knowledge unless he had to...which came sooner than expected. He pointed the gun for emphasis.

"Don't bother with that," he said, indicating a bottle in the doctor's hand. "I don't want to sleep for a week right now."

The doctor looked at the bottle, then at Sam. "You understand medicine, Senor?" he asked.

Sam looked expressionless. "Just don't try that again. The bottle third from the left should do."

The doctor looked at the bottle in question. He sighed as he took the local anesthetic down from the shelf and prepared the syringe.

Sam watched the clock while the doctor worked. This was taking too much time. He hoped that Blaisdell was still hanging on.

Al appeared next to him, happened to catch a glimpse of the injured hand and cringed once more. "I don't think I'm gonna like this leap."

Sam mouthed Al's name so that the doctor wouldn't be distracted by thinking he was crazy. Once he had Al's attention, he mouthed "Blaisdell," as best he could.

Al waved his ever-present cigar. "He's okay, Sam," he assured his friend, "I just looked in on him. He's still sleeping." Understanding that Sam couldn't exactly talk to him at the moment, Al continued. "Ziggy still doesn't know why you're here, except to save Blaisdell's life, which has an eighty-three percent chance. One thing is for certain: Ziggy says you are not, I repeat not, supposed to get involved with the local dispute here. Doing so will only get you killed in every single scenario Ziggy's run so far."

Sam was relieved. Maybe this leap would be easier than he thought. Blaisdell's wounds were critical, but Sam knew he could save him once he got there with the supplies. He nodded for Al to continue, while making sure that the doctor wasn't trying to sneak another sedative past him.

"That's about all we have so far," Al said. "Oh—I dropped in on the kid, you know, Peter Caine." Sam's head snapped up to look at him. Al raised his hands defensively. "Take it easy, Sam. He wasn't there. And his dad's gone, too. I don't know where they are."

"Thank you," Sam said to the doctor as he finished wrapping the injured fingers. He held up his hand to inspect the job. The three fingers were wrapped very securely; he only hoped that he could perform surgery without the use of those fingers.

"De nada," the doctor replied, wondering what Sam was going to do next. He found out.

Sam rose and inspected the medical equipment. Making the doctor turn to face the wall by menacing him with Ryker's gun, he prepared another syringe. "I'm sorry to repay your kindness this way," he said, as he turned the doctor around to face him and swabbed the inside of the doctor's arm with alcohol.

The doctor sighed. "That is all right, Senor," he said. "I am used to it." He watched as Sam effortlessly and painlessly injected him with something. "I prefer your method to some that have been used in the past," he said, rubbing his head with the memory.

Sam made the doctor lie down on the cot in the room and began his search for supplies. By the time Sam found a handy shoulder-bag to carry supplies in, the doctor was fast asleep. Sam opened drawers and stuffed the bag full. "Al," he said, "go and stay with Blaisdell. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Sam was on his way out the door when he saw the phone. *Kermit,* he thought again. *Maybe he can get us out of here...* He picked up the phone and, after a few moments of figuring out how to dial long-distance, dialed the station number from memory.

"One Hundred and First Precinct, Sergeant Broderick."

Sam cleared his throat as he tried to disguise his voice, making it deeper. "Detective Griffin," he rasped.

"Hold on."

Sam waited as the call was transferred. This would be a very difficult call. He had to fool someone who lived by his wits and cunning. Sam hoped, for the sake of the emergency, that Kermit would let him get away with it.

"Griffin."

What do I say? the flustered Sam thought. *Businesslike... be businesslike!* He cleared his throat again. "It's me," he said, hoping Kermit would know who he was.

He could almost feel the flurry on the other end of the line. "Are you insane calling here?!?!" Kermit hissed at him. "This isn't a safe line!"

"I know—it's an emerg—"

"Hold on."

Sam obeyed, waiting for Kermit. Within ten seconds, Kermit came back. "You've got three minutes—don't waste them."

Sam frantically tried to organize his thoughts. "I need assistance. Bl-umm.. .a friend is critically injured and can't be moved but we need a way out of here."

"What do you expect me to do about it?"

"You have contacts.. .resources..."

"So do you."

Sam thought quickly. "You are the only one I remembered. I got hit, too." He winced at the flimsy excuse but it was true, in a way.

Kermit paused. "Call me back at the other number."

"I don't remember the other number."

There was a longer pause. Then Kermit's voice came over the line, cold as ice. "If this is a game, you will be very sorry, despite our history. All right, call me back here in... six hours."

"Make it twelve. I have some surgery to perform."

"Surgery?" Kermit asked, a slight tone of surprise in his voice.

"Gotta do what I can to uh- help our friend," Sam replied, beginning to perspire.

"Twelve." Kermit hung up.

Sam hung up the phone. He couldn't blame Kermit for being so suspicious. He would have to work on his story a little more before he called him back. On the way out, he caught sight of himself—or rather, his host. It was a short man with slicked-back, black hair and about a two weeks' growth of beard. He looked really awful, in fact. Sam studied the image in confusion. *Funny,* he thought, *I don't feel that bad.* Remembering Blaisdell, he pulled himself away from the mirror and darted out of the hospital.

Sam rushed back to the site where he had left Blaisdell. There was no sign of Al, which seemed odd, but Sam was a little preoccupied with his thoughts on how to save Blaisdell's life to notice. He just had to save Paul! Not only for Blaisdell's sake but for Peter's. Peter had trusted Sam, albeit a little reluctantly at first. The two men had become partners and eventually, friends. Sam would not betray that trust!

He stopped the jeep and leapt out, medical supplies in hand. Entering the building, he was mentally reviewing everything he knew about the surgery he was about to perform...

...Sam turned the corner to find himself facing the business end of a .45!

Blaisdell, fully awake and obviously as weak as a newborn, pointed the deadly weapon at Sam. It was aimed straight and true, despite the sweat from the strain Blaisdell was under.

"Paul!" Sam exclaimed, halting immediately. No sense in getting shot..."Paul, put the gun down. I'm here to help."

Paul Blaisdell's hand wavered... and he finally dropped his arm, sweating and panting with the effort.

Sam lost no time in kneeling by his side and taking the gun away. "I can't believe you," Sam muttered as he next checked the bandages Paul had nearly managed to mess up. "You didn't think I'd leave you, did you?"

Paul took the question seriously. "You should have..." he said, weakly. "I'm not going to make it."

"Yes, you are!" Sam told him firmly.

"Well, I know I'm dying..." Paul murmured, quietly. "Never thought I'd hear you call me 'Paul'."

Oops, Sam thought. *Of course, mercenaries would be more professional and less personal.* He shrugged. "Maybe I'm getting soft in my old age," he said, hoping that sounded cynical enough for Blaisdell to buy.

"How about sloppy?" Blaisdell corrected, grimacing in pain. "You should leave right now. You can't fix me up; even I know that would take a fully-equipped hospital." Blaisdell put a hand on Sam's to try to stop the medical treatment, but Sam shrugged off the hand and kept working with the IV "I fully expected not to get out of here alive," Blaisdell continued. "It was worth it. Just tell my family—"

Thinking of Peter got Sam riled again. "I'm not telling them anything! I'm going to get you out of here so just shut up!"

Blaisdell looked at Sam oddly. Trying again, he said softly, "You'll never get out of the country with a wounded man."

"Kermit'll figure something out."

"Kermit?!" Blaisdell exclaimed, trying to rise. Sam had to use his strength to keep him down. Blaisdell grabbed his jacket sleeve. "Please don't tell me you called Kermit!"

"Ummmmm..." Sam stammered, trying, though in vain, to come up with an excuse.

Blaisdell saw the look on Sam's face and stared at him in astonishment. "You called Kermit. I don't believe it... I wish you hadn't..."

The force of his objection weakened Blaisdell so much that he began coughing. Fighting for breath, he asked, "Tell... tell my fam..." His voice dropped to nothing as his eyes slid shut.

Sam stared at the unconscious man. *Why shouldn't I have called Kermit?* he wondered. Then, he felt something painful in the pit of his stomach. He realized that being a mercenary was more than just keeping secrets. Sam also realized that he might have just signed Kermit's death warrant.

Kermit swore a few oaths as he typed on the computer keyboard, trying to make a phone connection that would be safe, and trying not to think about why Ryker would call him. Kermit's mind was racing over the options as quickly as his fingers typed on the keyboard.

Fact: Ryker does not call people for help. Fact: Ryker said someone was hurt. Premise: The 'someone hurt' was Blaisdell.

Fact: Ryker needed help getting himself and an injured man out. Premise: There was opposition that Ryker couldn't handle.

Fact: Ryker called him for help. Premise: Somebody wants him specifically for some purpose. Premise: Ryker was operating under duress, instructed to draw Kermit out.

Conclusion: Why?

Kermit shook his head, hoping the motion would shake out some of the cobwebs. The more he thought about it, the less sense it made. If someone wanted him, there were lots of methods easier than using Blaisdell and Ryker. And why Ryker? Kermit didn't have many ties with him and didn't owe him any favors. He had stated their history to Ryker as a test and Ryker hadn't responded specifically. So either Ryker was so out of it, he was incoherent—something Kermit had trouble believing, despite the stupid amnesia ploy—Ryker was setting him up for an unknown purpose, or there was another factor he hadn't thought of yet, but what could it be?

Kermit made the computer connection and finished his patchwork hacking to ensure that the call Ryker made could be traced by him and no one else.

Ah, the life of a spy, Kermit thought sarcastically. *Meet beautiful women, drive Aston-Martins, swill martinis... Such glamour...*

Peter lifted one foot high in the air, knee bent, as he balanced on the sturdy pole. Placing the foot down slowly, he then raised the other, held it suspended in air, began to lower it to the pole...

He missed and tumbled off the pole and onto the soft mat.

He cursed as he used his forearm to wipe the sweat off his face. Suddenly, his father was standing over him, holding a towel. Fighting the urge to ask if Caine was disappointed, Peter took the towel. "Thanks," he said, quietly, wiping the sweat off and trying to hide his shame and embarrassment.

Caine stood there for a moment, his chi carefully examining his son's state of mind and being. This exercise was not hard and Caine knew that Peter should have had no trouble with this part of the training. When he found the answer, he sighed in sympathy.

Peter looked up. "What?" he asked, almost defensively.

Caine put a hand on his shoulder. "I know what is wrong, Peter."

Peter shook his head. "No, I don't think so, Pop," he stated, strongly. "I'm tired. I've been at this for hours, the pole was slippery..."

Caine merely looked at him.

Peter tried to think of more excuses until he finally realized that it was no use. "Oh, God," he said, burying his face in his arms, "Paul's gonna die...and I can't do a damn thing about it!"

Caine knelt next to his son, offering comfort by taking Peter in his arms.

"Are you still here?"

Kermit jumped slightly, out of reflex, and fought to not draw his gun that he had moved underneath his desk. It was a good thing, too; it would not be wise to fire a weapon at the Captain of the precinct.

"No, I'm not still here," Kermit responded, trying to put a sarcastic/jovial tone in his voice. "I went fishing. This is my evil twin, Skippy."

"Hmmm..." Simms mused. "Kermit and Skippy...better not say that too loud. Some TV exec might think that sounds like the name of a new sitcom!"

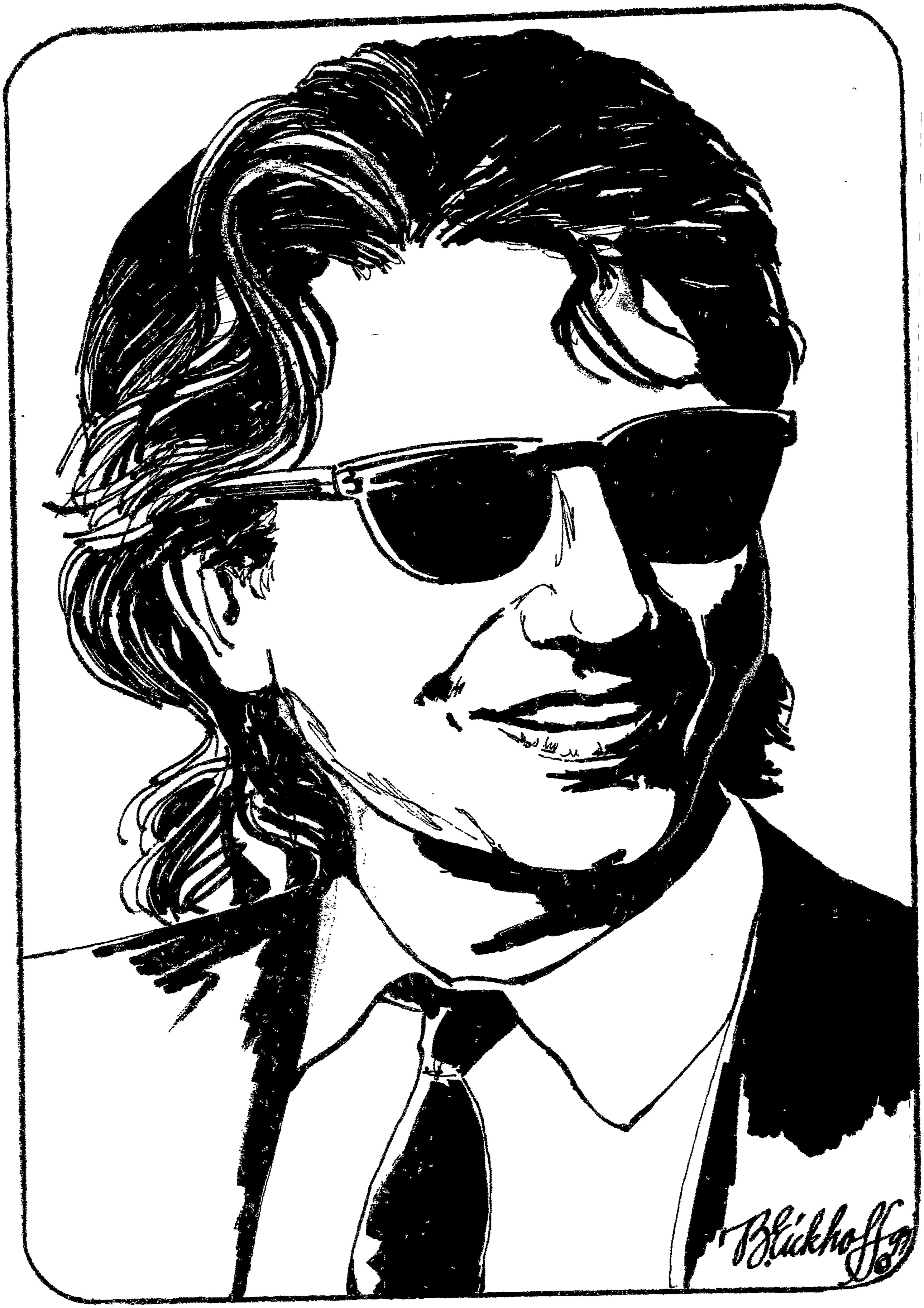
Kermit glared at her, not sure whether to be amused or annoyed. "That's hitting below the belt, Captain."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Yes, I'm still here."

This time, Simms glared at him. "I meant my unspoken question. How long are you going to stay here and why are you staying so long?"

"I found a terrific new Webchat. They discuss the finer points of Tupperware and how to store them and great things like that. Somehow, I find it too fascinating to ignore."


B.Eickhoff ©97

Simms stared at him. For Kermit to not give her a straight answer, the matter *must* be serious. "Need any help?" she asked softly.

Kermit regarded Blaisdell's replacement thoughtfully. "Not now, Captain. Can I take a rain check?" he said, giving her a purposefully wolfish leer to see what she would do.

She just laughed. "As you wish, Detective," she said and shut his door.

Kermit turned back to his work and was startled once more by the ringing of his telephone. He cursed himself for being so skittish and glanced at his watch. It was not yet time. Surely Ryker would not be so stupid as to-

"Griffin," he answered warily.

"Kermit?"

Kermit, despite himself, felt his jaw drop. "Peter?"

"Yeah!"

Kermit sat there as though a lightning bolt had hit him. Surely, Peter calling didn't have anything to do with-

"How's it going, kid?" Kermit asked, inserting the jovial tone into his voice once more. "They got you staring at your navel yet?"

"Nah, that's for graduation! Kermit, I have something really weird to ask. Don't think that this is out of left field, but this is important..."

"Shoot."

"Have you heard from Paul?"

Kermit's stomach clenched into knots. "Paul?" he asked carefully.

"Yeah, Paul. My foster father, friend from your spy days, ring any bells?"

Kermit could hear Peter's blatant exasperation... and something else in his friend's voice... He couldn't quite make it out. "Oh, that Paul. Uh... No, I haven't heard from Paul. Why do you ask?"

"I have a feeling that he's... hurt. Dying."

Kermit could now hear what Peter was hiding: fear, pain, desperation. He rested his head on his hand and tried to untie his jumbled thoughts. Should he tell him? "Peter..."

Peter froze. He knew. All of a sudden, he knew that Kermit knew something. His voice reflected his newfound knowledge as he leaned into the phone. "Kermit!" Peter said, urgently. "This is important! What do you know?"

Kermit let out a heavy sigh. "I can't tell you."

Peter nearly screamed in frustration, then thought it through, his mind racing. "Okay, Kermit, just tell me...is he hurt?"

Silence.

Peter closed his eyes. "I knew he was hurt," he mumbled. "I saw it." Peter could almost feel the puzzlement that that statement generated but he ignored it. "Look, you've gotta help him!"

"Peter...you don't understand. There's more to this—"

"Damn you, Kermit!! If you don't help..." Peter took a deep breath to control himself. Shouting wouldn't do any good. "Kermit.. .please..." Peter's voice broke.

Now, it was Kermit who closed his eyes. *Great, just great.*

"Please..."

"All right," Kermit said quietly, barely aware of what he was doing. Then, before Peter could respond, he said, "I've got work to do." With a slam of the receiver back into its cradle, he hung up on Peter and glared at the phone. *It's all your fault...* he thought at it. Bending over the keyboard, he got back to work.

"I am stupid! Stupid! Stupid!"

Al, hoping that Sam was finished with the surgery by now, walked into the middle of Sam's tirade at himself. He gaped, watching his friend pace back and forth, cursing his intelligence. It looked like Sam was finished with the operation and was in a different section of the building so as to not disturb Blaisdell. Finally, Al stepped in front of Sam, only for Sam to walk through him!

"Hey!" Al protested. "Is that the kind of thing you do to a friend? Just walk right through him?"

Sam paused. "Sorry, Al," he muttered, "but I think I've just screwed everything up!"

"Why? And how's Blaisdell?"

"He's not good. Not good at all. If I can't get him into a sterile environment, he could get an infection. In his condition, that would kill him!"

"Sam, you'll do the best you can," Al comforted. "You always do."

"It may not be good enough. Ask Ziggy to run death certificates for Kermit Griffin and Paul Blaisdell."

Silently, Al complied. After a moment, he shuffled his feet nervously.

"What?!" Sam demanded.

"Nothing on Griffin." Al hemmed and hawed until Sam shot him a withering glare. "Blaisdell has a sixty-seven percent chance... of dying."

"Damn it! I bet he does get an infection! I need better medicine!" Sam paced. "I feel like I'm operating with my eyes closed! If that isn't bad enough, Blaisdell just woke up and told me I shouldn't have called Kermit. For all I know, calling him might've just put him in the same danger that we're in!"

Al, rubbing his head in remembrance, said, "Uh, Sam? I really think that Griffin can take care of himself... Uh oh." Al looked at the handlink again. Reluctantly, he repeated the information. "Blaisdell's chances have gone down... seventy-four percent chance of dying..."

Sam swung toward Al. "I'm going to have to operate again. Al, see if Ziggy can center you on Kermit. See if you can find out where Peter and his father are."

Al grimaced. "Do I gotta?" he asked imploringly.

"You're a hologram—he can't hurt you now. Go!"

"All right, all right..." Al grumbled. "Gooshie, you heard the man. Center me on Griffin..."

Al disappeared... and reappeared elsewhere, halfway in a person. Startled, he jumped back. "Gooshie!" the Admiral bellowed. "Try to improve your aim a little bit, why don't you?" Harrumphing in annoyance, Al stepped back to view the scenery. He was in a police station and the person he had nearly shared the same 'space' with was a take-out boy, impatiently waiting for his payment.

A blonde came into the precinct and looked at the delivery boy in puzzlement. "Detective Powell," she said, displaying her badge. "Can I help you?"

Al, leering, said, "You can help me, beautiful."

The delivery boy, shifting his weight constantly from one foot to the other, nodded toward the back as he said, "Oh, uh, thanks, ma'am, but..."

"Powell, you trying to abscond with my dinner?" a new voice demanded. They all turned as Kermit strode out of his office, wallet in hand. "Here you go, kid," he said, handing him a wad of cash and taking the styrofoam container.

The kid looked at the money and grinned at the amount. "Thanks!" he said and dashed off.

"Hey, Kermit," Powell said, "what's up?"

"Hunger. If you'll excuse me..."

Curious, Jody followed him into his office while Al pushed buttons on the handlink to position him inside the office. Kermit sat down and, placing the container on the desk, looked up at Jody. "Yes?"

"What are you doing here so late?"

"Getting some work done. It's quiet this time of night."

"I don't believe you for a second."

"Smart lady," Kermit mumbled as he picked up his coffee and took a sip. He grimaced. "I knew I should've ordered some juice. After twenty-three cups, coffee gets a little old."

"Kermit! What's going on!?"

"Just some research." Kermit looked into the concern-filled eyes of Jody Powell. He knew he would have to tell her something or she would never leave. "Peter called."

"What?"

This caught Al's attention as well; he stared at Griffin for the answer.

"You hard of hearing, Powell?"

"What did he say? How is he? How could he call from Tao Temple?"

"Temple...?" Al muttered, pushing buttons on the handlink.

Kermit laughed. "Well, if you're not interested, sweetcakes..." He laughed again when Jody's hand clamped down on his sleeve. "Hey, watch the material... Peter's fine. Relax."

"Then why did he call?"

"Just wanted to say hi. Look, I really need to get back to work, and I would like to eat my dinner before it gets cold!"

"Kermit!"

The ex-mercenary looked up at Jody. "Hey," he said, "Peter's fine. Don't worry. Do you mind...?"

Jody, taking frequent backward glances at Kermit, slowly exited the office.

Kermit, opening the container, waited until Jody was out of the precinct lobby before taking a huge bite of the turkey sandwich and then diving underneath to manipulate the computer connections.

"Gooshie," Al said, "center me on Sam." He promptly disappeared.

Al reappeared to see Sam sitting over Blaisdell and prudently turned his back, unwilling to see an operation in progress. "How is he, Sam?"

Sam gave a half-shrug as he continued working. "Not as good as I'd like," mumbled Sam. "This place isn't doing much for him. I've got to get him into a clean environment, preferably without rats! What's Kermit doing?"

"He's doing something with his computer at the precinct," Al explained. "He did happen to mention that Peter is away at a temple. Tao Temple, to be exact."

"What is he doing with the computer?"

"I don't know!" Al said, exasperated. "I guess he's getting ready to talk to you. Do you know what you're going to say to him yet?"

"Kind of."

"Well, good luck," Al muttered, shaking his head incredulously. "I saw him chase off a really good-looking blonde—any guy who can do that must have ice-water in his veins..."

"What's Blaisdell's percentage of dying now?"

Al consulted the handlink. "Seventy percent." At Sam's sigh, he asserted, "It's getting a little bit better...!"

"I don't know if I can save him, Al, I really don't."

"Sam, don't talk like that!"

"Go find Peter and tell him about his father." Sam shook his head miserably. "Tell him I'm trying my best but... it may not be enough"

"Sam..."

"Go! Please!"

Al, looking at his friend with concern, pressed a few buttons and vanished.

Al reappeared in a sea of men with bald heads wearing saffron-colored robes. "Geez louise," Al exclaimed, looking around, "Halloween came early this year!" The bald heads turned to him with a look of annoyance. Al's eyes widened as he realized that the men were indeed looking at him and remembered that Caine and his friend Lo Si could see him. He smiled a sheepish apology as he backed out of the circle, rubbernecking, trying to see Peter. The men promptly turned back to what they were doing.

Al shook his head. "Fruit loops," he muttered quietly as he walked around the temple. They certainly had enough candles in this place! He was tempted to just call out to Peter but didn't want to disturb all the meditation going on here.

"Al!"

Al jumped to hear someone call his name. He turned to see the old guy, Lo Si, walking up to him and smiled. "Hey, how're you doing?" Al greeted. "Heard Peter was here..."

Lo Si studied the hologram. "There... is trouble?"

"Kind of."

"I will take you to him."

Lo Si led him through the labyrinth of hallways to a room where Peter was balancing on one long, thin pole suspended in the air.

"Holy hammocks!" Al exclaimed.

At the new voice, Peter instantly started to windmill his arms to keep his balance. He fell but managed to land on his feet and looked at the new arrival in astonishment. "Al?" Peter counted himself lucky to recognize the hologram. When Sam was helping him, Al had had his 'accident' and Gooshie was pinch-hitting for him when Peter was finally able to see the holograms. Just before Sam left Peter finally got to see what Al looked like. He approached Al as Al beamed a big grin for a hello.

"Heeeeyyy, kid, you look great! But whattaya balancing on a toothpick for?"

"Part of my training as a Shaolin," Peter told him, gratefully taking the towel that Caine handed him. "What are you doing here...? Paul! It's Paul, isn't it?"

Al frowned. "How'd you know about that?"

Caine stepped forward. "Peter is the one who requested Dr. Beckett's assistance in saving his foster father."

Al looked at them all, puzzled. "What are you talking about? Sam leapt into—"

"Ryker," Peter completed. "I know. I had a vision that Paul was hurt and I was hoping that Sam could help. Did he?"

Al waved his cigar. "You had a vision? You have any idea what that sounds like-?"

"Is Paul okay?!!"

Al looked at the ground.

"Tell me!"

"Well, kid," Al said despondently, "it's not looking too great. Sam is trying his best, he really is."

Peter swallowed. "How bad is it?"

Al checked Ziggy via the handlink. "Hey! It's getting better! It's up to sixty-one percent!"

"Sixty-one percent that he will survive?" Caine asked.

"Well... um... no, against," Al said reluctantly. "But it was a lot worse before. Sam's doing everything he can. Even Kermit is helping."

Peter ran a hand through his hair worriedly. "Al... what can I do to help?"

Al slumped a bit. "Pray."

Finding a telephone was easier than Sam had thought. He found a pay phone behind what passed for a convenience store in South America. The building was deserted. Even though Sam thought that was a bad sign, he figured Kermit ought to like it since there was no one around to hear.

Sam unknowingly held his breath as he picked up the phone and placed the call.

Kermit answered on the third ring. "Griffin."

"It's me." Sam promptly held the phone out away from his ear as a high-pitched whine sounded over the phone for about five seconds.

"It's clear," Griffin reported. "What's going on?"

"We need... assistance getting out of here."

"How is he?"

"Better. He needs to get to a hospital."

"That may be tough. All right, I have your location. Can you tell me what happened?"

"We got attacked and he took a hit for me."

"Can you tell me now why you can't contact your own resources?"

Sam was glad Kermit finally asked that. It was the one question he was prepared for. "Yes. I was compromised. I can't use any of them."

"Except me."

"You're technically one of Bl-...his contacts. They shouldn't track you to me." Sam held his breath again. This was a big assumption on his part; he only hoped that he was right.

"They might think he gave you my name."

"Doubtful—he was badly hit. He hasn't been conscious very much." Remembering that Blaisdell didn't want Kermit involved, Sam decided to try to find out from Kermit. He didn't have much optimism in succeeding but it was worth a try..."Do you have any old enemies down here?"

"I have enemies everywhere."

"If it puts you into the line of fire, don't do anything. I'll figure something out." Sam was gambling that Kermit wouldn't call his bluff and that Kermit valued Blaisdell too much to listen.

"Reverse psychology? You must be desperate."

Sam winced. Okay, Griffin had seen through that one. He decided to be bold by being honest. "He led me to believe that it wouldn't be... healthy for you down here."

That got a moment of silence from Griffin. "All right, all right," he sighed. "Whatever's going down, it's obvious you need help. I'll see what I can do. Call me back in seven hours."

Sam hung up, feeling that the conversation had gone much better this time, and headed back to Blaisdell.

When Sam returned, Blaisdell was awake again, his gun once again resting on his abdomen, finger on the trigger. This time, though, he had heard and recognized Sam's approach and only tensed for a second.

Sam mock-glared at the man. "You need to rest," he snapped at Blaisdell as he tried to take the gun away from him.

Blaisdell moved the gun away from Sam's reach. "No," he said softly, his eyes conveying a message that Sam didn't want to see.

"Give me that gun."

"No."

Sam exhaled noisily in exasperation. "Okay, keep the gun, just give me the bullets."

"It's not much good then..."

Sam sat on the floor next to him. "You need sleep. It's not good for you to be moving around so much. Come on," Sam said, trying to coax him, "you must be exhausted."

Blaisdell's eyelids fluttered, as if confirming the mercenary's condition. With an effort, Blaisdell forced them open again. "You have to get out of here. I'm a liability." His fingers curled around the gun again.

Sam stared at him, horror dawning. *Was Blaisdell going to kill himself to enable Ryker to get out safely? Would he do that?* He looked into Blaisdell's eyes and realized that this man was fully capable of it. "Paul..." he began, trying to reach the man, "Paul... think of Peter... and Annie! And the girls!" He only hoped that Ryker knew as much about Blaisdell where Peter was concerned as he did, but somehow Sam sensed that this was the point of no return and had no choice but to take chances with his cover.

Blaisdell swallowed. "Annie's strong—stronger than she looks. I've always admired..." He paused to cough weakly, which, by the expression on his face, felt like his lungs being ripped out. Sam carefully poured some water for the injured man. Blaisdell gulped at it greedily, wishing he could guzzle it, but Sam, controlling the flow of the water, wouldn't let him. Blaisdell then picked up the conversational thread as if they'd never been interrupted. "... admired her for her strength... Her blindness... and putting up with me! The kids..." He shook his head in wonderment.

"I'm sure that..." Sam stopped, not knowing if Ryker had ever met Annie, and paused to rephrase. "She is strong, but that doesn't mean she doesn't need you. And what about Peter? How do you think he'd feel?"

Blaisdell lowered his gaze, unwilling to meet Ryker's eyes.

Sam, encouraged, warmed up to his subject. "His natural father died on him—turned the kid into a basket case... Peter still hasn't recovered! The fact that you walked out without a word to him did enough damage but what do you think will happen when he finds that you're dead? Just like his father!" Sam enunciated.

Blaisdell stared at him. Sam realized that he might have just blown his cover but didn't care at the moment. He had to make sure Blaisdell wouldn't blow his brains out the second Sam turned his back. That meant playing hardball.

"You want to shatter Peter for life," Sam continued, "go ahead and shoot! Come on, do it now, so I can start cleaning up the mess. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"...no... I don't want that..." came the soft protest.

"Then fight, dammit!" Sam, fighting for Peter now, was no longer registering what words came out of his mouth. "You're a fighter! Fight for your life! It's not just about you or me! There are people who love you. You can't just throw that away!"

"Is this the same man who was willing to blow up ten men, including us, to—"

"The past is not the issue!" Sam said, not letting Blaisdell trap him. It was too easy to slip. "I'm talking about now—and the future! If you ever cared about your family—"

"You never cared for my family. You always called them a liability."

"Strategically, they are," Sam conceded. *What kind of man is Ryker, anyway?* he thought. Sam knew he was operating at a disadvantage because Ryker was a mercenary, called upon to kill, whereas Sam was a doctor, who wanted to heal. "But thinking strategically is not your life. These people... your family are part of what you are just as you are a part of what they are. Sure, fine, you destroy yourself and your pain is gone but, their pain would be just beginning. Some may never recover!"

"Death is a natural—"

"There is nothing natural about what you're thinking about—nothing! If your family hears that you did everything you could to survive and return to them and died in transit, their pain would be less. But if they hear that you gave up and killed yourself so that I could get out of the country..." Sam shook his head. "I am not worth that!" Sam felt the absence of a ring on his finger and confabulated, hoping Blaisdell would buy it. "I know I've never been the family type—" Blaisdell was expressionless but Sam pressed on, "But you are!"

Blaisdell looked at Sam and looked at the gun. Without a word, he turned the gun around and handed it to Sam, who took it, trying hard to mask his relief.

"I never knew you had it in you," Blaisdell murmured.

"Neither did I," Sam returned. Now that he was batting one-for-one, Sam decided to tackle the other, more minor, problem. "I called Kermit again. He's going to think of someone to help us out. So, why didn't you want him to be called?"

Blaisdell's expression flickered something unreadable for a second. Then, he relaxed into a smile. "Because I don't want him to find out that I played a practical joke on him."

Sam sat back, puzzled. He had thought Kermit's life was in danger. "What are you talking about?"

Blaisdell's smile turned into a devilish grin, weak though it was. "I got him." In a conspiratorial tone, he confided, "I got him good!"

Sam couldn't help but smile in return. "How?"

"Actually, I got two of 'em... at the same time!" Seeing Sam's confusion, Paul explained. "I had a girlfriend when I was younger—well, I had a lot of girlfriends—" He winked at Sam, "but this one was different. She was one of the few that I told what my... business really was. She didn't bat an eye. Hell, she even offered to help me once in a while! She was always attracted to the wrong kind of man, she said, but that made things all the more exciting... more alive. Now, Kermit... he's had a few tempestuous flings he likes to call marriage and sometimes, the women he's picked were good for him for a time. But they never lasted. He said he almost didn't want them to last—it kept things interesting... See where I'm going with this?"

Sam grinned. "So you set them up to go out together? How'd you do that? When did you do that?" he asked, knowing that Blaisdell had been away for a long while.

"The second I left, it started. By interesting coincidence, my old flame was the one I picked to sub for me at the precinct, where I knew she would run into Kermit."

Captain Simms? Sam thought, his jaw dropping. He thought back to the time he had leapt into Kermit's life—he had barely said two words to her. He was too busy keeping Peter out of trouble. The way Simms barked at him the second he leapt in suggested that she didn't like Kermit very much. Sam then remembered that, just before he leapt in, Kermit had played a practical joke on Simms but his swiss-cheesed memory couldn't remember what it was or even if he had known what it was in the first place.

"But..." Sam's mind wasn't catching up as fast and he knew it, "but how do you know that they'll be attracted to each other enough to go out?"

"Karen's an adrenaline junkie—she loves her work and she hates unsolved mysteries. Kermit is a mystery. There's no way she could resist. Kermit loves strong women. Once Karen has him in her sights, it would be easier to pry off a bulldog. Believe me, I know. I also know Kermit. He's ready to try to settle down, as much as our type can settle down. Karen is strong enough to take his way of life and yet, is... ahem, woman enough to help him forget that way of life. They're a perfect match. Of course, if they both figure out what I've done, I'm a dead man, anyway." He yawned, tired from the exertion of staying awake, reminding Sam that he was a doctor.

"You need to rest," Sam said and, this time, Blaisdell didn't argue and let Sam cover him up with a blanket Sam had found on one of his forays.

"What did Kermit say?" Blaisdell asked curiously.

"Just to call back in seven hours." Sam noticed, as his fingers automatically reached for Blaisdell's pulse, that Blaisdell was looking at him rather oddly. *Did I mess up?* Sam wondered, taking the pulse. He knew he shouldn't ask—he might get into more trouble regarding Ryker's past—but he didn't think Ryker would let a look like that go by without asking. "What?"

"I don't think I've ever seen you like this," Paul said softly.

Sam thought quickly; leaping into hundreds of lives gave him plenty of practice. "I owe you. You took that hit for me."

"Luck of the draw," Paul said. "Frankly, I didn't think either of us would make it."

"Then why did you come down here?"

"I couldn't let you rot in that prison. I take care of my friends," Blaisdell said.

Sam remembered his host's three broken fingers and couldn't suppress a shudder. "Well," Sam said, "that makes two I owe you. Get some sleep."

Sam tried to suppress a yawn as he called Kermit seven hours later, as scheduled,. It had not been an easy night for him. Paul woke up twice, tossing and turning in pain. Sam was almost out of morphine to give him. If something didn't happen soon...

"Griffin."

"It's me," Sam said then held the phone away from his ear as Kermit cleared the line.

"It's clear," Kermit reported a minute later. "I have transport ready."

Sam raised an eyebrow. *That was fast,* he thought. *I guess Kermit works fast when he needs to.*

"How is he?" Kermit asked, a bit of tentativeness in his voice.

Sam smiled. As heartless as these mercenaries seemed, Kermit's tone clearly told him otherwise. "He's stable but I need more medicine."

"Anything else?"

"What else do I need? You name it! Food, water, a hospital..."

"I'll see what I can do."

Sam raised an eyebrow again. He was being sarcastic but Kermit took him seriously.

"Now, listen," Kermit said, "here's the code. Memorize it."

"No problem." Sam listened, a wave of confidence flowing through him as his photographic memory kicked in, learning the required phrases with no trouble. "So," Sam said after Kermit was finished, "Are you coming down?"

Silence.

"Kermit?" Sam could hear the other man on the end of the phone but he didn't speak. *Damn...I've messed up again,* he thought in dismay, panicking. If Kermit became suspicious enough, he might just call off the transport and Paul would die!

"No," Kermit finally stated, emotionless in his tone. After another long minute that felt like an hour to Sam, Kermit continued. "Just look out for the contact—and keep out of sight. Time's up." With a loud click, Kermit hung up.

Sam breathed a huge sigh of relief. Even though the mercenary was suspicious, he had obviously believed that Blaisdell was hurt and, as such, was willing to put that suspicion aside. Lucky for Paul.

After securing some food and drink, Sam strode into the building where Paul was hidden. Paul looked gratefully at the food—until he saw what it was. He stared at Ryker, shocked.

Sam looked at him. "What?" he asked defensively. "Okay, so it's a little greasy—a lot greasy—but it's better than nothing. That's why I brought these napkins."

Paul watched incredulously as Ryker patted the food between the napkins to soak up the grease. He then took a morsel and brought it to Paul's mouth. Paul, grunting from the exertion, swatted his arm and the morsel went flying.

"Hey!" Sam protested, "we don't have a lot to choose from. This is the only thing I could find!"

"Better we starve than eat that," Paul said. "Are you out of your mind eating chicken down here? And... you brought... water? You know poultry and water down here are not to be taken internally! There's so many germs in that, we'd die quicker than from any bullet!"

Sam opened his mouth slightly in shock. He, as a doctor, knew that foods weren't as sterile in South America but he figured it was better than starvation... Besides..."I saw the water being boiled, Paul," he protested.

Paul gaped at him. "That's the old 'boil-the-water' tourista trick! You've seen it a hundred times! What's the matter with you?"

Sam looked down. *Damn!* he thought. *I really screwed up...* The problem here was that, ultimately, Sam was a trusting person.

"Oh, geez, sorry, Ryker," Paul said, looking chagrined. "I've been fading in and out so much, I didn't realize... How much sleep have you had?"

Sam shrugged. "Not enough, I guess, but that's no excuse. I was in a hurry and didn't think, that's all."

Paul regarded him. "Well, no wonder—what with taking care of me and sneaking in and out of here..."

"Well," Sam said, standing up, "guess I should go and try again. We have to have food. I'd better get going so I get back before Kermit's contact gets here."

"Wait a minute—you told Kermit to send the contact here?" Sam's expression, as always, betrayed him. Paul shook his head. "They really must have put you through the wringer..."

"Kermit gave me a code phrase!" Sam said defensively.

Paul looked at him. "You always take extra precautions—always—by meeting him someplace else. You'd better give me back that gun. Come on, hand it over. If this explodes in our faces, you'll need my help. Hand it over." Sam meekly handed over the gun and Paul checked it, shaking his head. "I don't believe it... You said Kermit's contact will be here soon?"

"Yes. But don't worry; Kermit's not coming down himself."

"I should hope not. Help me up." At Sam's confused expression, Blaisdell elaborated. "Help me into a sitting position or close to it. I can't shoot while flat on my back."

"You can't get up! Your wound—"

"Help me up, dammit!"

Sam, seeing no recourse, helped Blaisdell sit up slightly by bunching some blankets under his head and shoulders. "I don't understand," Sam said, "If it's Kermit's contact, we can trust him."

"You can't trust anyone!" Paul exclaimed. "Our only hope is that Kermit is paying him better than the competition is. Even if he is, the guy might try to double-cross him, hoping to cash in from two cashboxes at once. You know this!"

Sam knew he was now dangerously close to blowing his cover. *I'm definitely not cut out to be a mercenary!* he thought.

As Ryker left for more food, Paul stared at his gun thoughtfully as he reflected over the last few days. He only remembered bits and pieces just after he got shot. Frankly, he really didn't want to remember anything. He'd been shot plenty of times; he knew when it was just a graze and when he'd better start making peace with his demons, as Caine would say. He could have sworn that he had no chance of making it this time but apparently Ryker had gotten the bullet out with no ill effects. He was very grateful that Ryker seemed to have improved his surgical skill by leaps and bounds.

Just what the hell is wrong with Ryker, anyway? Blaisdell wondered. It was almost as if Ryker was a totally different person... Paul had never seen Ryker make so many screw-ups. Paul had attributed it to the condition he had found Ryker in when he rescued him. Ryker had barely been able to walk on his own; it was Blaisdell's own urgency that had propelled the mercenary onto his feet so Paul wouldn't have to carry him.

Then they had shacked up in that hut for Ryker to get his second, third and fourth wind. He didn't seem delirious or confused, merely weak... and embarrassed at being captured the way he had been. When they decided to move on, Ryker was pretty much back to his old self again... until Paul got shot.

Paul did not understand it. Ryker was making screw-ups that were so elementary... At least, Paul knew how Kermit was financing their rescue, which gave Paul a reason to hope that everything would turn out all right. Not many people could outbid Kermit, once he put his mind to it, especially with Paraguay's resources at hand...

Sam stomped out of the decrepit building in a pique. He was screwing up right and left and every which way from Sunday! A chilling thought occurred to him; what if Paul Blaisdell's death came to be because of Sam's incompetence as a mercenary?

"Hey ya, Sam, what's with the gloomy-gus look?"

Sam raised a hopeless look to his friend and partner. "Al, you've got to do something to help me out here. I've got to leap so that Ryker can take over. I don't think I'm here to help Blaisdell."

Al chewed on his cigar thoughtfully. "Well, Sam, I know why you're here but you're not gonna believe it." At Sam's waiting look, he continued. "Peter asked you to."

"Al..."

"Swear!" Al waved his hand. "I don't believe him, either, but he said he had a vision that Blaisdell was in danger and asked you to go help him."

Sam frowned, trying to remember the few seconds before he'd just leapt in. It was difficult with a swiss-cheese memory playing tug-of-war with a photographic memory but he did seem to remember a sense of... Sam shook his head. There was a... feeling just before he leapt into Ryker. A sense that he was needed for something specific, but he'd always had that feeling. That's why he was leaping around to help others. This feeling was more intense though, more urgent. Was that Peter?

"Sam, don't tell me you believe this malarkey?"

"I... I'm not sure what I believe. Peter learned to see me, remember, Al? His father coached him. Maybe he's learned a few more things..."

"Nobody has been able to control your leaps, Sam! Nobody!" Al peered into his friend's tired eyes. "Well, except for—"

"Well, whatever. How I got here doesn't matter," Sam said, trying to force his mixed emotions behind him. "The important thing is Blaisdell's life. Give me some—"

Sam and Al both spun around, hearing a noise from the bushes. Sam drew Ryker's gun as he scanned the area while Al got busy on the handlink. Al finally shrugged his frustration. "Sam," he said, "you're lucky that Ziggy's been able to provide the information she has so far. The only records kept here are on stone tablets!"

Sam silently waved at Al, indicating to help him try to explore the area. Al used the handlink to reposition himself a few yards away, hoping for a better vantage point of the area.

It was a surprise to both of them when Sam felt the muzzle of a gun being pressed to the back of his head. "Cisco Kid?" the Spanish-accented man asked.

"Pancho Villa," Sam replied, crossing his fingers mentally.

The man circled him warily, still holding the gun on him. "I think you are Presidente Vasquez."

"I happen to be Vasco de Gama."

Both men breathed relief as they lowered their weapons.

"That's the stupidest code I ever heard," Al grumped, annoyed about being so terrified that Sam was in danger and there was nothing that he could do.

"Senor Ryker, I presume." The man shook his head. "I am Tomas Martinez. El Rana sends his regards. I have supplies in the jeep."

Al, ever helpful, consulted the handlink. "El Rana is 'the frog' in Spanish, Sam. I guess he means Kermit."

Sam smiled at the man. "Food?" he asked hopefully.

"Si. Food, water, medical supplies—"

"Medical supplies?! Let me see!" Sam felt a surge of hope.

"My men will bring it to the hut, senor. Lead the way."

Al opened his mouth to protest but Sam, slapping the man on the shoulder in relief, had already grabbed Tomas' arm and led him to Blaisdell, hoping that the supplies contained everything he might need to save Paul's life.

Sam rushed into the shack that had been their refuge. "Paul! It's all right—" His statement was cut off as he felt something hard hit him over the head. He fell forward into darkness.

Sam came to with a groan, his head aching.

"Greetings," the pudgy Latino greeted him, pumping his hand up and down furiously. "El Rana sent me to you."

Sam frowned as a sense of deja vu overtook him. Looking around, he could see one team of Latino bandidos overtaking another team of Latino bandidos. Try as he might, Sam could not figure out who was on what side. They seemed to know, though. Sam refocused his attention back to the Latino in front of him, grinning at him like he hadn't a care in the world.

"I am Jorge."

"Jorge what?"

"Senor," Jorge laughed, his belly shaking, "don't make me make a name up."

"Tomas gave me his last name."

Jorge turned to look at the unconscious man being dragged out and laughed out loud again. "Tomas?" he asked. "His name is Frederico Nunoz."

"Okay, okay, no last names," Sam conceded, getting the point. "Do you have any supplies?"

"Si, food, water—"

"And medical supplies." Sam sighed, wondering if they would ever get out of here with the double-crossing going on.

He took the bag that Jorge handed him and pawed through it. He looked at the bottles and felt his heart jump—with excitement. Penicillin! Plenty of penicillin! And morphine! There were also other drugs that Sam would not have chosen but would certainly do in a pinch, which this was. He wasted no time in crawling to Paul's side to clean and redress the wound, this time being able to do it properly. His practiced hands moved at lightning speed and the bandidos faded into the background as he delighted in working with the proper tools. He even decided to remove the makeshift stitches he'd put in before to apply new ones.

In the corner of his eye, Sam could see Al pacing, waiting for the outcome of the operation.

Finally, Sam sighed and leaned back. Paul still had a fever but the antibiotics should help with that. He had found and cleaned out the growing infection and restitched the wound. He wasn't thrilled about operating with unsterile hands but he'd washed them and poured alcohol over them and that would have to do. Paul seemed none the worse for wear. In fact, except for the fever as a reminder of the battle his body was fighting, he was looking pretty good. Good, that is, in comparison to what he looked like before.

Sam covered the sleeping form of Paul Blaisdell.

"You are a surgeon?"

The question out of nowhere surprised Sam, who looked up to see Jorge, holding out a canteen to him.

"No," Sam answered, remembering he was supposed to be Ryker. "Let's just say I'm a talented amateur." He put the canteen to his lips and then slowly brought it away to look at it. "How do I know this is good?"

Jorge laughed his belly-laugh, grabbed the canteen and took a swig. He then handed it back to Sam, who tentatively took a drink. He found himself gulping more of it. The water was fresh and cold. He had forgotten his own depleted condition in worrying about Paul.

Jorge brought a metal container, sifted and mixed the contents with a plastic fork, took a bite and then handed the tin to Sam. Sam sniffed it. It was some kind of chili casserole and, after his first tentative bite, he realized how hungry he was. It was cold and greasy but Sam ate every bite.

He sat back, feeling the strength flood back into his limbs. "Thank you, Jorge."

Jorge waved off the thanks. "I am well paid. Besides, if I double-cross you," he said, reading Sam's mind, "one of my men will shoot me!"

"Whaaat?"

"Senor Rana is not to be crossed," Jorge said with a grin. "He is blackmailing one of my men to shoot me if I double-cross you! Of course, I do not know which one it is! That makes it more exciting, eh?!" Jorge laughed a huge belly laugh again as Sam looked at him in astonishment. "Oh, come on!" Jorge laughed, "it's done all the time!"

Sam shook his head. More and more, he was very glad that none of Kermit's associates had visited him while he, Sam, was there, inhabiting Kermit's life! He couldn't handle the mercenary life for very long. He was suddenly distracted by Paul, who was stirring to consciousness.

Paul moaned and opened his eyes. Even though he had the benefit of better medication, Sam knew Paul would still have a great deal of pain. "Go back to sleep, Paul," he comforted.

Paul looked up at him, wincing with the motion, and his eyes widened. "Who are you?"

Surprised by this question, Sam frowned in confusion. "Paul, you know who I am," Sam replied, recovering. "Relax. We're safe."

"Where's Ryker?"

Sam touched Paul's forehead; he still had a fever. He endeavored to use that fact to convince his charge to stop asking questions. "Paul, you have a high fever and are a bit delirious. Rest. I'm Ryker and everything is okay."

Paul shook his head. "No. Ryker looks like Robert Vaughn. You don't."

Damn. He can see me, Sam decided. This is a new one. Now, people in intense pain could see him. "The fever's playing tricks on you, my friend."

"No." Paul, despite his weakened condition, remained unconvinced. "Who are you? Where is Ryker? He was here a minut—" It was obvious by Paul's pale face that he was in a great deal of pain. He bit his lower lip to keep from crying out.

Sam felt a twinge of guilt for trying to deceive this injured man. When the pain subsided, Sam wiped a cloth over Paul's brow and once again encouraged his patient to rest as Jorge left with his men to secure the aircraft.

"Not until you tell me who you are..." was Paul's reply. "Did they get Ryker? We're not safe..." Paul endeavored to sit up, preparing to defend himself.

Sam broke. "All right... All right... Calm down. My name is Sam Beckett—"

"Never heard of you..." Paul said, as Sam helped him ease back onto the pillow. "Friend of Kermit's?"

"No. I am a friend of Peter's, though."

Paul became very agitated and tried to sit up again. "My son? What's he got to do with this? Is he okay? My wife and daughters okay?"

Sam gently pressed Peter's foster father back to the pillow. "They are all fine. Peter asked me to come and help you."

"How? He doesn't know where I am or what I'm doing."

"No, not specifically..."

Paul bit his lip again as a wave of pain flowed through his abdomen. Despite the discomfort, he forced out, "Tell me straight... What's going on?"

Sam sighed and shook his head. "You wouldn't believe me."

"Try me."

Sam remembered that Paul probably knew Kwai Chang Caine as well. Perhaps his tale wasn't so farfetched. Keeping his voice low, Sam told his tale. "My name is Sam Beckett and I'm a research scientist. I invented a machine to allow time travel." He studied his patient's face for a reaction but found Paul taking the news seemingly in stride. "The experiment went awry. Now, I replace people in certain situations to prevent tragedies."

"How did you meet Peter?"

"Some time ago, I'm not sure how long, I replaced Kermit and assisted your son in solving a crime." Sam made sure to leave out the detail that, if he hadn't been there, Peter would be dead now.

"Where do they go?"

"Who?"

Paul coughed, then said, "Who you replace."

"They are safe. They are sent back to my time while I take their place in their time."

"When's that?"

"Sorry, that's classified."

"Peter asked you to help me?"

"Yes," Sam confirmed. "When you get home, you might see some changes in your son."

"What changes?"

"I think he'd rather tell you himself," Sam said. "Now, will you rest? I'll be here to watch your back."

Satisfied, Paul nodded, already half asleep.

Sam watched with a physician's critical eye as they carefully loaded Blaisdell aboard the aircraft. Jorge approached Sam with a grin. "The pilots have been paid," he informed him, "so you should have no trouble."

"How can we trust them?" Sam had been dealt so many double-crosses, he was seeing conspiracies everywhere. "Don't tell me; we can't trust them."

Jorge laughed. "You are learning, my friend, but, in this case, your caution is not necessary. The pilot's payment will be stored along with the two of you. The pilots try anything and they lose their payment!"

"How much were they paid?" Sam asked curiously.

Jorge laughed again, so uproariously that he couldn't stop for five minutes and his eyes began to tear. Finally, his belly shaking, he clapped a hand on Sam's shoulder. "Have a safe trip," he said, "and, for your own sake, do not smoke!"

With that cryptic message, Jorge roared with laughter again as he sped away in the jeep.

Shrugging, Sam climbed into the waiting plane and secured himself a place beside his patient as the plane took off.

Now, they were safe. They had to be. Sam sat on a wooden crate and checked his patient again. Thanks to the medical supplies sent to him by Kermit, Paul Blaisdell would live. Paul could use some rest in a sterile hospital but his life was no longer in danger. Sam breathed a sigh of relief. He had not let his friend, Peter, down.

"How can I thank you, Sam?"

Paul's quiet voice brought Sam back to reality. "Thank me by getting well," Sam said with a smile. "And by not tipping off the real Ryker when he comes back. He probably won't remember any of his trip." Sam leaned back and suddenly jumped as the crate began to break under his weight. He leapt off and examined the damage. "I didn't know this was so fragile... what's that smell?" The question was half-rhetorical. As a physician, he had a very good idea what that smell was but didn't want to believe it. He examined the crated box more thoroughly, confirming his suspicions. "That's cannab-!"

"Sssssshhh!" Blaisdell cautioned. "You'd better hide that crate. The pilots will think we've raided it on purpose."

"But... but... ."

"What's wrong?" Paul asked, confusion apparent.

"This... is marijuana!" Sam hissed at a whisper. "It's illegal to ship this into the U.S.!"

Paul sighed. Whatever this strange man was, scientist, doctor, whatever, it was evident that he was no mercenary. He'd proven that in the past few days. "They're not shipping it. It's their payment. For helping us."

Sam just sat there, paralyzed in his shock. "You mean... Kermit paid them... .I thought Kermit was a cop!"

"Well... kind of," Blaisdell said with a strange smile. "Sam... I thought you knew where we were. Paraguay is one of the leading nations in the production of marijuana. That's the trade here. Different nation, different rules. You have to give people what they want for them to help you. That's the way the world works."

Sam set his jaw. "I don't believe that." After all, didn't he help others and get nothing in return?

Paul Blaisdell studied the scientist analytically. "Well, I guess you don't. You're a lucky man, then. Kermit and I have to believe it or we'd have been dead long ago."

Sam shook his head. "There's always a better way."

Paul yawned. "Well, I'm too tired to argue with you but I hope, eventually, that you're right."

The pull began. Sam knew it was time to leave. "I have to go. Take care of yourself."

A blue-white light surrounded the man before him. Paul shaded his eyes, muttering, "Thanks, Sam." A second later, the light faded. Paul opened his eyes and saw his old comrade sitting near him. Just to be certain, he tried refocusing his eyes, the method he'd adopted to see Sam, but he saw no change in his friend this time.

"What are you staring at?" Ryker challenged.

Paul answered with a smile and drifted off to sleep.

Sitting, meditating, in his favorite spot by the lake, Peter felt his spirit quiet—a welcome event after several days of living in disharmony. He knew Paul was safe now.

He sent his gratitude out into the Tao. *Thanks, Sam.*

A grin spread on his face when he received an answer. *You're welcome, Peter.*

Bright sunlight streaming in the window pulled Peter out of deep slumber.

"Damn," he muttered under his breath. "Overslept....Why didn't Pop wake me?" Throwing off the covers, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. His feet touched carpet, then, glancing around, he recognized his surroundings. "Home... Oh, yeah, we got back last night," he reminded himself.

Reaching out, he picked up his watch from the nightstand. It read seven-ten a.m. Since it was a rare treat, given his rigorous training schedule at the temple, to relax in bed in the morning, Peter sank back onto the mattress and settled the covers over himself. Gazing at the ceiling, his mind automatically cleared and his eyes closed. He easily attained a meditative state.

Then, the psychic residue in his environment began to trickle into his awareness.

The bed was not the peaceful place of rest it should be. A great deal of physical pain was trapped within the mattress and his body responded. Both shoulders, his right side and his head began to throb in sympathy for the work-related injuries which had forced him to recuperate here in the past.

Sinking deeper into the trance, going beyond the physical, brought a dark void to his attention. As he learned during his training, Peter explored the darkness. It swallowed him up and deposited him back at the temple where he spent the early part of his life... and into the fiery hell it had become one fateful night...

Explosions rocked the floor. Brick and mortar rained down from above. Smoke blackened the air. Black-clad men fought with the priests. Gunfire resounded in the corridors.

His friend, Philip, lay unmoving at his feet. Coughing, he squatted down and maneuvered the unconscious boy onto his own adult shoulder.

Rising with his burden, Peter surveyed the area for an escape route. He spied several of the other students running for the exit leading to the garden. He decided to follow.

Fate had other plans.

A powerful explosion shook the foundation. Peter fell, dropping Philip beside him. A beam pinned him in place...

He looked up into Ping Hi's skeletal face, his question obvious to the old man. "I am sorry, young Peter. Your father did not survive. Neither did any of the other boys."

He rolled onto his side, back to the ancient one, chastising himself. "I couldn't save my father... I couldn't save Philip... I couldn't save any of them..."

With a jolt, Peter returned to the present. *Guess I still have some things to work out there.* He breathed deeply to calm his racing heart. *Time to get up.*

Fate had other plans for him on this day as well...

A subconscious shift put his awareness outside his body and he stood looking down at his stationary form lying on the bed. A silver cord extended from the body's navel to his spirit back. As long as he was attached thusly to his body, he knew he could return safely.

"*You just don't get it, do you, Peter?!*"

Peter oriented on the voice. It came from a semi-transparent Kelly, who was standing beside the open closet door, clothes draped over her arm.

"*We agreed to an open relationship. What are you so pissed about?*"

Peter looked to his left and saw himself, also semi-transparent, standing about two feet in from the bedroom door.

"*No! You agreed. I didn't!*" Kelly spat at him. "*I've had it and I'm leaving!*"

"*Fine!*" Peter yelled back at her. "*Don't be here when I get back!*"

Peter watched himself turn and stride out of the room. A slam of the front door, five seconds later, punctuated his relationship with Kelly Blake.

Whew! Peter sighed. *Nice vibes in here!* He stepped away from the bed, before becoming consciously aware of it, and discovered he was curious about what he would find in the rest of his apartment. He stepped across the bedroom threshold...

... and into gunfire.

He reacted by jumping back into the bedroom, putting his back against the wall and grabbing for the gun that had been holstered on the right side of his belt for the better part of ten years. Not finding his weapon gave him pause—enough for it to sink in that he was witnessing an event from the past. Amused, he moved forward and viewed the action from the bedroom doorway.

Two men in suits stood at the end of the short hallway into his apartment. They fired .45 automatics at his upended dining room table. Kelly was sobbing as she endeavored to melt into the couch.

Some cop she was... he scoffed.

The men ceased fire and relaxed. Peter felt their confidence, certain that their target had been killed. So did his other self, who had been waiting for an opportunity to return fire from behind the table. He watched as the other Peter broke over and fired. The man closest to Peter the observer was thrown back against the wall, a crimson stain spreading across his chest. The other bad guy turned and high-tailed it out of the apartment. Peter watched himself comfort Kelly as their images faded away.

A click to his right caught Peter's attention. While he watched, his front door opened. Through it, he could see the real door was still closed. A see-through Patrick Michael Epstein peeked in then entered, putting his lockpick back into its case.

Eppy? When did he break in here?

Eppy walked in, obviously checking the abode for the one who paid the rent. "*Peter? Yo-hoo?*" Eppy looked into the bedroom, right through Peter of the future. Peter suppressed an urge to speak to his former partner.

Not finding whom he sought, Eppy crossed to the living room chair, picked up the newspaper and sat down. A second later, a knock sounded on the door.

"It's open," Eppy called as he turned the page of the paper.

Peter, from his position in the bedroom doorway, saw the see-through door open again. A ghostly image of his father walked in and closed the door behind himself. As Caine strode slowly down the hallway, he stopped and looked the disembodied Peter in the eye. Peter smiled. After his Pop turned away, Peter thought, *I'm finally going to see what went down between these two.* Neither of them had been willing to share details of the incident with him when he had questioned them about it.

Eppy spoke. *"I didn't want to wait in the hall. You and me gotta talk, Partner."* Looking over his shoulder, Eppy saw Caine and rose quickly from the comfort of the chair. *"Who the hell are you?"* He challenged the man unknown to him. Peter could feel Eppy's cop instincts kicking in, especially the one about protecting your partner.

Caine stepped closer, bowed and said softly, *"I am Caine."*

Eppy looked confused and shrugged. *"Caine what?"* After a short pause, he made the connection. *"Caine? You related to Petey?"*

Caine bowed again and replied, *"I am his father."*

"Ah ha, so you're the guy, huh? The one who walked out on him," Eppy accused as he turned away and moved to the nearby model train layout.

Eppy's sudden dislike and suspicion regarding Cine filled the room. Those feelings washed over Peter, prompting him to speak. *"Eppy, no. It wasn't like that. I was—"* Neither of his 'guests' acknowledged his words.

Caine joined Epstein at the train set as he explained. *"We were separated. I thought he was dead."*

"Yeah? Well, Eppy's law number three... .Excuses are like butts. Everybody's got one and they all stink," Epstein informed him. Then, angry, he told Caine, *"Some kids you leave. I know I got three of 'em in Baltimore and they're all scum."*

Peter saw his father, head down, idly right an upset Amoco sign on the train set. The pain his father felt reached him and he felt guilt well up inside his chest. The things he had told Eppy of his past—clouded with his childhood impressions—caused Eppy's strong reaction to his father. *"Cool it, Eppy,"* he suggested.

Eppy paid him no heed and continued on his tirade. *"Peter's a good kid. Him, you shouldn't have left."*

A third time, the see-through door opened. This time, Peter watched as he, looking mighty depressed, entered. His own emotions—anger, self-loathing and fear—pelted him. He had just shot the innocent bystander in the supermarket while attempting to nab Stella and the Green Hornet and he had been questioning his ability to be a cop.

Eppy, happy to get away from Caine, pounced on the upset and now, startled, young detective. *"Where you been? I been lookin' for you."* He grabbed Peter and continued, encouraging Peter to the door, *"You got what I need. You saw Stella and the Green Hornet so it's you and me, kid, back out on the street. C'mon, let's go."*

Peter knew how the rest of this scenario played out so, concentrating, he cut off the images. *This place needs an exorcism... definitely!*

Retracing his steps, Peter returned to the side of his unmoving body. Calming himself, he sat down on the bed then shifted to lay down. Superimposing his soul on top of his body would allow him to reinhabit the earthly form. As seconds passed in silent darkness, he began to experience physical sensations.

A frightened scream shattered the silence surrounding him, preventing his spirit's return to his body. Reaching out with his chi and locating the person who needed help, Peter the spirit traveled to the woman's side to assist.

He surveyed the surroundings. The woman, about his age, had been forced into an alley. Peter thought the alley seemed familiar. A young man carrying a purse was running away from her.

Peter recognized the purse snatcher. *Well, well, if it isn't Jimmy Johnson. Still a petty thief, I see.*

Jimmy halted ten yards from his victim, and looked back, awestruck. "Huh?"

I'll see you later, kid, Peter told him, then turned his attention back to the woman.

Jimmy glared at her, long enough for his face to be imprinted on her mind. Deciding she was not the one who threatened him, he ran off.

Now, calm down, Peter advised the frightened woman. *Take a deep breath.*

The woman looked towards him, though unable to see him, and inhaled. She exhaled slowly, then repeated the process.

In the meantime, Peter checked out the street. People hustled to and fro. Cars zoomed by. He recognized one car parked in front of a nearby shop. He returned to the woman.

Okay, now go back to the street. To the right is the Bun King Bakery. Go inside and ask to call the police, Peter instructed.

She took another deep breath, then walked in the indicated direction. Peter followed. After reaching the alley's mouth, she turned right, as she had been told, and entered the bakery. Inside, she walked up to the counter. A woman in a navy suit was placing an order.

"Two of the double chocolate and..."

"M-may I use the ph-phone?" she inquired, interrupting.

The customer put down her coffee and turned her attention to the obviously frightened woman. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

"M-my purse... stolen... " She pointed at the bakery door. "H-have to call the police."

"Consider them called, ma'am," the woman said as she reached into a jacket pocket. She pulled out a wallet, which she opened to reveal a badge. "Detective Jody Powell, One Hundred and First Precinct."

Peter smiled as he watched from a position just inside the door. The woman was in good hands. *Thanks, Jody.*

Jody swung her gaze toward the shop entrance, thinking she had heard her name spoken. Seeing no one standing there, Jody focused again on the victim. "Did you get a good look at the person who stole your purse?"

As he was about to leave the confines of the bakery, movement in the back by the rows of freshly baked bread caught Peter's eye. He relocated to that area. There stood his father and himself. He was pressing his lips to his father's forehead after their discussion of his Persian Flaw.

Why did I fight everything my father stood for so hard? Peter, the spirit, asked himself. A few seconds passed as he pondered the question. *I was afraid...* he realized.

With a sudden laugh, the memory of how he had distracted the bad guys in the back room surfaced in Peter's mind. *This I gotta see...* He thought as he shifted his location to the storage area, where he found himself naked but—or butt-- for cowboy boots, hanging on a stand holding trays of bread. He could taste the bread his previous self munched upon.

As he watched, the baddies pushed Eppy, Skalany and his father into the room. Everyone froze at the sight of him unclothed.

"*Ya gotta help me, man,*" past-Peter mumbled. "*It's freezin' out there!*" He pointed to the outside.

"*Get him outta here!*" Stella screamed.

Two of her accomplices moved forward to carry out her instructions. Caine went on the offensive, knocking the rifle from the hands of the one holding his arm. Eppy socked a couple of the bad guys while Skalany flipped one over her hip and disarmed him.

Peter saw himself step away from tray holder, fire twice then duck behind the rows of freshly-baked bread for cover. A second later, rounds shot from the Uzi Stella carried, pinged off the tray holders behind him.

The melee continued until Caine, using his Qi Gong technique, took Stella out of action and Peter, using a little brute force, took out the Green Hornet.

The good guys—Eppy, Skalany, Caine and past-Peter—gathered around the fallen criminals. After checking for a pulse on one of the downed men, Eppy exited to call an ambulance. Skalany cuffed Stella.

Standing next to Peter, who still wore nothing but boots and a smile but held a strategically positioned apron in front of himself, Caine said, "*Perhaps the Persian Flaw in your character has something to do with exhibitionism?*"

The ghostly Peter replied with a question and a smirk. "*Well, it worked, didn't it?*"

Skalany put an end to the debate. Looking up at the two Caines, she joked, "*Put your apron on or you'll scare the horses.*"

What the hell was I thinkin'? current-Peter asked himself, rhetorically, as the vision ceased. Fatigued but feeling good about his experiences, he willed himself back to his apartment. Just as he was about to re-enter his body, he sensed danger. Focusing on the feeling, he let it carry him to its location and found himself in the backseat of Mary Margaret Skalany's car. She was driving. TJ sat in the passenger seat.

"We're gonna be late for the meet, Mary Margaret," TJ remarked, anxious.

"I know, I know," Skalany replied, applying more pressure to the gas pedal. "How was I supposed to predict there would be a traffic accident on our route?"

"I'm sorry," TJ said. "Just hurry it up a bit. We can't afford to let this informant slip through our fingers."

As she stepped down on the accelerator, Peter's sense of danger increased. A picture of the car blackened and burning formed in his mind's eye. *Damn! There's a bomb... probably rigged to explode at a certain speed.* He checked the speedometer—fifty-four—then leaned close to his former co-worker's ear. *Mary Margaret, slow down. The car is rigged to explode.*

Fifty-five.

Mary Margaret, listen to me... Slow down!

Fifty-seven.

Damnit, Skalany, slow down now!

Fifty-nine.

Pop, help me!

Peter felt his father's gentle touch on his mind and telepathically explained the situation in less than a heartbeat. Caine joined his chi to Peter's and Peter spoke again. *Mary Margaret, pull over and stop now!*

Sixty.

Mary Margaret blinked and removed her foot from the pedal. As the car slowed, she pulled off the road.

"What the hell are you doing?" TJ asked angrily.

Skalany looked confusedly at TJ once the car stopped rolling. "Something's wrong... I—"

Peter still felt the danger. *Shit! The bomb's on a timer. Skalany, get out of the car! Do it! Run!*

"Get out of the car, TJ. Now!" Skalany told her partner, opening her door.

The expression she wore told TJ she was not kidding so he swung open the door and jumped out. Instinct prompted both of them to run away from the car on a perpendicular courses.

Son, we must go also.

Peter focused on Skalany, then found himself at her side.

Three seconds later, the car was a smoking, burning hunk of junk.

TJ, skirting the car after the flames had died down a bit, joined Mary Margaret. "How did you know?"

A shocked Skalany replied, "I do not know...."

Disaster avoided, a relieved Peter felt a pull toward his body. He relaxed and let himself reinhabit his body. Still in the meditative state, he felt his father's presence.

You have done well, my son. Caine told him, his happiness at the safety of Mary Margaret obvious to Peter.

Thanks for your help, Pop!

The outcome is thanks enough. You should rest now.

I will take it easy.

What are your plans for the day, son?

I'm going to see Mom, then go to the precinct.

Ah... .Please give my regards to your family.

I will.

Caine slipped out of Peter's mind and the intensity of their contact diminished, back to a state where Peter could tell his father was alive and well. Now, he knew how his Pop had kept tabs on him all that time.

Despite a slight weariness upon coming out of the trance, Peter rose, showered, shaved and dressed. It felt great to have a hot shower, then slide into real clothes. For old times' sake, he even donned his cowboy boots.

Thirty minutes later, Peter was, physically this time, on the street outside his apartment building. A short walk on this beautiful spring day got him to the corner bus stop. Several people were gathered there so Peter joined them, stepping close to the Plexiglas shelter that protected the bench. Instantly, he was overwhelmed by the noise, though no one spoke. He swayed, a bit disoriented, as anger, sadness, happiness, jealousy, impinged on his heightened sense of awareness. Leaning against the enclosure kept him from drawing anyone's attention as he compensated. A little more energy to the shields he used to protect himself took care of the problem. *The priests at the temple were sure quiet... .The precinct is gonna be a great place to hang out if people are this loud on the street.* He briefly wondered how his father managed all this time.

The Woodlands subdivision of Sloanville's Montrose suburb was Peter's stop. The Blaisdell home was a block away from where he stepped off the bus. When he was a kid, he recalled, he would run that block to the house, always anxious to get home then onto the next activity. Today, despite being excited to see his family, he walked, appreciating the environment. *Taking time to smell the roses.... Who'd have thought I ever would.*

Two houses away from his goal, he passed the Johnsons, who were already out working in their garden. Peter waved a greeting, which the older couple returned.

Finally, Peter found himself at the end of the driveway to his parents' house. Just seeing the house, he determined, made him feel happy. He could almost feel love radiating from the structure as he reached out with his chi to see who was home.

First, he found Annie's aura and established a link to her. She was puttering around in the kitchen. His stomach growled, reminding him that he had not eaten in quite awhile. He felt her reach for the cinnamon roll dough in the fridge... his favorite breakfast.

With a shift of his chi, Peter found Kelly upstairs in her room. She was throwing books into her backpack, anxiety-ridden over final exams. He touched her aura, offering comfort. *Chill out,* he thought and the frantic way she had been loading her backpack was replaced by careful positioning of the books in the bag.

He also found Carolyn upstairs, in the room that used to be her bedroom. Near her, he discovered a second aura—a very young one he did not recognize. *Carolyn had the baby.*

As he started to withdraw his chi, he brushed up against a fifth aura. *Dad!* A smile burst onto his face and he jogged for the house.

At the sliding glass doors that led into the family room, he stopped and rubbed his hands together. *Gotta try it...* He planted his thumb against the lock, then slid his thumb down. The lock yielded then he quietly opened the door and stepped into the house. Inside, he quickly reset the alarm so it would not signal an intrusion.

The twin aromas of coffee and cinnamon grabbed his nose and dragged him into the kitchen. He didn't resist. Standing in the doorway, he watched as Annie completed pouring herself a cup of coffee. After she replaced the pot in the Mr. Coffee machine, he spoke. "Mom?"

Annie whirled around to face him, completely surprised. "Peter?"

Suddenly, he was at a loss for words. "uh... Hi."

Annie gave him a big smile and said, "Hi?! Is that all you have to say for yourself? Come over here and give me a hug!!"

Peter closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around his mother. She snuggled into his embrace. It hit him just how much he missed her, feeling her love surround him.

"I missed you so much," he told her, kissing the top of her head.

"I missed you, too, dear."

He loosened his grip and her hands, no longer clasped behind his back, traveled up his chest, down then back up his arms, brushed his neck, then traversed his face. He knew she was taking inventory and he grinned.

Annie 'saw' his expression and smiled as her fingers found the hair at his temples. "They didn't make you shave your hair or have you been in hiding until it grew out?"

"I didn't have to shave it."

"You're more muscular..."

"And twice as stubborn." He grinned again.

"Oh... Well, it's still good to have you home..." She told him, a smile continuing to curve the corners of her mouth. "Will you tell us all about it? Have you eaten? When did you get home?"

"Yes... No... Late last night."

"Do you still eat cinnamon rolls? Drink coffee?" Annie asked, probing.

"Yes to both," Peter replied.

Annie smiled, happy to find that her son still existed inside Peter Caine. "Well, get a cup and join me. The rolls will be done shortly!"

"Don't mind if I do..." Peter replied, releasing her then retrieving a cup from the dishwasher. "Why are you making rolls anyway? That's a Sunday thing."

"I'm not sure. Just a few moments ago, I had this feeling that it was going to be a special day." She reached up and touched his face, feeling it grow warm under her hand. "I can see I was right."

Peter cursed his inability to control his blush response as he felt his cheeks get warm. Shaolin training didn't take care of everything.

Annie pulled him back from the edge of embarrassment. "Haven't I told you that it's bad karma to sneak up on a blind chick?"

As he poured his coffee, he replied, "Sorry, mom. Guess it's a bad habit I picked up at the temple. Everyone is so quiet there."

"That's okay. I can't wait to hear all about it!"

Kelly bounced into the room. "Mom, who- Peter?!"

Peter, even using his enhanced reflexes, barely got his coffee down on the counter before she attacked him, wrapping him in a bear hug. He squeezed her in return. "Hi, Squirt," he said.

Wrapped in his warm embrace, her head on his shoulder, Kelly felt her anxiety drain away as Peter rubbed her back. After a moment, she broke the hug and grabbed his right wrist as he reached for the coffee cup and pot. She started to push up his sleeve, asking, "Well?"

Peter twisted his arm gently, extricating himself from her grip. "No peeking. You'll get the story over breakfast."

"Good," a masculine voice said.

Peter turned to the door and found Paul standing there in his pajamas and robe, a warm smile on his face. "Dad."

Paul's smile grew more fatherly, if that was possible.

Kelly stepped out of the way and Peter walked over to his foster father, arms open—requesting, and at the same time offering, a hug. Paul responded in kind. They embraced.

"I'm glad you're home ... uh... Peter." Paul faltered, uncertain where he now stood with his foster son.

Caught up in his own perceptions, Peter missed the hesitation. He registered a lingering discomfort in Paul's chest and the night he had witnessed Paul get shot leapt into his mind. To help ease the remaining pain, Peter reached out with his chi and quieted the abused nerves near the site of the injury. Then, Peter sensed Paul's mental anguish—*Have I lost my son?* In response, Peter let his love for Paul fill his aura as he whispered near Paul's ear. "I am more your son now than I ever was before, Dad."

Paul squeezed his son tightly as he thought he felt Peter's love surround him. Taking that scared, angry boy from the orphanage, giving him a home and getting him through many difficult years had led to this moment. Paul knew it had been worth it before, but this was the sweetest icing possible for the cake.

Carolyn stood in the doorway with the baby in her arms and a tear in her eye as she witnessed the exchange between father and son. When it was over, she said, "Our turn."

Peter wrapped his arms around his sister and her son. "Now, this is what I call a homecoming," he remarked. Turning to the baby, he asked, "Who might this be?"

"Andrew," Carolyn replied. "Andrew, this is your Uncle Peter."

Andrew favored Peter with a coo then reached out his arms for his uncle to take him. "I thought he had better taste than that," Carolyn joked.

Lifting the baby out of his sister's arms, Peter asked, "Hey, what's not to like?"

"Breakfast..." Annie announced, opening the oven door as the timer sounded.

Peter carried the baby into the dining room and sat with Andrew on his lap. Annie, Carolyn and Paul followed, bringing rolls, coffee and baby food. The rolls were passed and coffee settled on the table. Carolyn popped open the baby food jars then tried to take Andrew from Peter. Andrew made his desire to stay on Peter's lap known and rather loudly. "I'll feed him," Peter offered.

"What do you know about feeding a baby?" Carolyn asked.

"How tough can it be?" Peter countered.

With a devilish smile, Carolyn set the baby food in front of her brother and said, "Be my guest."

Everyone but Peter and Andrew bit into their cinnamon rolls as Peter spooned some of the baby fare into his nephew. Andrew, usually a fussy eater, accepted each bite, fussing only when Peter stopped spooning and took a bite of cinnamon roll.

"Okay, who are you and what have you done with my brother and my son?" Carolyn asked.

Peter responded with a grin as he fed Andrew some more cereal.

"Well, talk..." Kelly demanded of Peter.

"Where to begin..." Peter sighed, then took another bite of his roll.

"Why don't you bottom-line it for your family, who are wondering what your future holds," Paul suggested, endeavoring to maintain a matter-of-fact tone.

"All right," Peter agreed. He pushed up the left sleeve of his light sweater and showed them his unscarred forearm. "I completed my training and earned the right to ascend to the priesthood. I turned it down, opting to remain a cop."

Surprise registered on the four other faces around the table.

"Honey, I thought you were going to become a priest so you could understand yourself..." Annie stated, somewhat confused.

"I just needed to complete the training to sort out my head, Mom," Peter told her. "I hope you weren't hoping for a son who was a priest..."

"I was hoping you would find what you needed, dear."

"I did, Mom. Thanks," Peter replied. "I guess my path is that of a 'Shaolin cop.'"

"What is a 'Shaolin cop?'" Paul asked.

"When I figure that out, I'll let you know," Peter said with a shrug. "After visiting for a while with you, I'm going to the one hundred and first to see if they happen to have an opening for a detective. Speaking of which, what are you up to these days, Dad?"

There was that "Dad" word again. Paul tried to keep the pleased note from his voice. "Retirement."

Peter expressed his doubt while wiping the baby's chin. "Yeah, right."

"We'll talk about me later. You continue," Paul urged.

"Yes, dear. Can you tell us about your training?" Annie asked.

"I don't see why not," Peter told her.

A horn sounded in the drive. "Damn, gotta go..." Kelly said, rising. After grabbing her backpack, she stopped next to Peter, bent down and gave him a little kiss on the cheek. "I'm glad you're home, big brother."

"Glad to be here. Good luck on your finals," Peter replied, catching her for a kiss on the cheek.

"How did you know I had finals?"

He shrugged at her, a perfect imitation of his father.

"Never mind... Geez! as if you weren't irritating before," she muttered, heading for the door.

Peter smiled at his foster parents and remaining sister.

"Do go on, Peter," Annie suggested.

Peter downed more of the roll and took a sip of coffee before continuing—to talk and feed Andrew. "Well, I had the knowledge and skill in Kung Fu I needed so the training—spiritual, mental and physical—helped me realize it. First, though, I had to prove myself worthy of receiving the training."

Peter hit the highlights of his days at the second temple. "Before I could walk the rice paper, I had to achieve spiritual and physical balance. You'd have loved the last exercise on that road..." He described standing on the poles, holding up the pails of water, how much trouble he had with it until he understood and how he could now hold aloft the pails effortlessly, standing on one foot on one pole. He purposely left out the part about the knives strapped to his upper arms.

"After I walked the paper, I took a spiritual journey, with some help from Pop and Lo Si, and spoke to Master Po. He told me how it is possible to achieve anything and how to recognize my true path."

His parents and sister took it all in without comment. Paul did notice that Peter was sitting still and using very few gestures. Very atypical Peter.

"So, after all that and putting some black-market smugglers out of business..."

"Smugglers?" Paul asked, requesting elaboration.

"Oh, didn't I mention that the Sing Wah were doing business with two of the other students, who were selling ancient artifacts on the black market?" Peter asked with a smile.

"You seemed to have left that out," Paul said with a slight shake of his head.

"The Sing Wah were trying to obtain a crystal that had the ability to drain a Shambhala Master of his chi. Those two students had it in their possession. I saved Pop and Lo Si from it by smashing it on the floor, right in front of the Sing Wah."

"I don't suppose they weren't too happy about that," Paul commented dryly, between sips of coffee.

"That's the impression I got as I caught the two shuriken they'd thrown at my face," Peter said, his tone light. "They attacked but Pop, Lo Si and I took them out."

"I swear, kid, you are a trouble magnet," Paul told him.

"Yeah, I am," Peter agreed. "The hell of it was that I knew it was going to happen."

"How was that, honey?" Annie asked.

"I'd had the same dream every night where I followed my Pop down a corridor. He entered a room and I couldn't get in to save him from something," Peter explained. "As it turned out, the room was in the temple. I kicked the door open then I was able to get to him and Lo Si to save them from the effects of the crystal. Oh, speaking of my Pop, he sends his regards."

"That is considerate of him," Annie said. "Is he okay with your decision?"

"Yes. His philosophy is 'You do not choose your path, your path chooses you.'"

"And your path leads back to the One-Oh-One?" Paul asked, looking for confirmation of an earlier statement.

"I hope so," Peter replied. "Simms might have given my spot to the first person who requested it just in case I did come back."

"You had trouble with Karen?"

"We got off on the wrong foot and would butt heads every once in awhile. She thought you gave me preferential treatment and I don't think she ever got used to my Pop."

"I warned her."

"So she said, but I don't think she took you seriously."

"Then, why do you want to go back?" Paul asked. He wanted to be certain Peter had given thought to other options. "You could be assigned to another precinct..."

"I know I could go elsewhere, Dad, and if nothing's available at the One-Oh-One, I'll pursue a position at another precinct." Peter sensed Paul's feelings on the matter. "Hey, maybe I should go to the Ninety-Sixth and be a thorn in Eppy's side," Peter said, snapping his fingers.

"Eppy'd probably love that," Paul joked.

"Yeah, he'd like to have me around to fetch him coffee again. Truth be known, though, I want to go back and work with the people I consider part of my family. Those would be the ones on the team that you built, Cap'n."

"I'm pleased about that, son," Paul said, a gratified smile on his face.

Peter returned the smile then asked, "What have I missed here, besides Dad's homecoming and Andrew's birth?"

Peter glanced down at his watch. Eleven forty-five. Time for him to face Simms and ask for his old job back.

As he rose from the couch, Peter said, "I have to run so I can catch Simms while everyone is at lunch."

"Good luck, son," Annie said. "Let us know how it goes."

Peter leaned over and kissed his foster mother on the cheek. "I will, Mom."

Paul pushed himself to a standing position and asked, "Peter, may I see you in my den for a moment first?"

"Sure, Dad."

Paul led the way. Peter, out of habit, tried to determine what he might have done wrong to warrant this private meeting as he followed in his dad's wake.

Arriving at the den, Paul opened the door and stepped inside. Taking a seat on the edge of his desk, he waited for Peter to enter and close the door.

"Sit," Paul suggested, pointing to one of the guest chairs.

Peter did as requested, still uncertain what was up. Try as he might, he couldn't pick up the reason for this discussion. Paul's emotions betrayed nothing.

He had nothing to worry about. Paul leaned down and placed a fatherly hand on his shoulder. "I wanted to thank you, son."

"For?" Peter asked, confused.

"Saving my life! Helping me get home safely."

"S'cuse me?"

"Your friend Sam Beckett..."

A grin broke out on Peter's face. "Oh... Now, I'm with ya."

"He said you asked him to come and help me...?" At Peter's nod, Paul stammered, "But... how? How did you know I was in trouble?"

"I'd had a long day of training, plus something was bothering me so I went to the lake near the temple to chill out. My Pop joined me there and suggested I meditate to find out what had me bugged. I did and found myself in a jungle. Saw you get shot. I wanted to help you myself but there was no way I could get there in time. So I asked Sam. He's the only time traveler I know... except for Pop." He grinned.

"Wait—back up. How did you 'ask' Sam?"

Peter flushed a bit before answering. "I sent a little mental request his way. I didn't think he'd mind."

"Sam told me I'd see some changes in you," Paul said, a smile coming to his lips. "I guess he was right."

"Well, what do you think of the new and improved Peter Caine?" Peter asked as he rose from the chair.

Paul pulled Peter into a hug. "I'm damn proud of him. Now, get out there and keep the city safe!"

Their hug broke and Peter saluted smartly as he exited. "Yes, sir!"

Paul smiled at his son's retreating back.

Keys in his hand, Peter exited the Blaisdell house and walked to the garage. Inside, he found his car.

Standing next to it, he ran his hand along the shining blue sheetmetal. Scenes from car chases played in his mind. Cutting off the images, he opened the door and slid into the driver's seat. He opened his mind and his awareness expanded to fill the space the car occupied.

It felt right and he backed out of the garage.

Using a technique he had learned at the temple, Peter walked unnoticed past Sergeant Broderick and entered the squadroom. TJ sat at his desk, head buried in a file. Skalany sat at her desk, talking on the phone. He saw Kermit hunched over his computer, deep in concentration. Peter walked past all of them, unseen, intent on visiting the Captain. He knocked once on the door.

"Come in."

Peter opened the door and leaned in. "Do you have a moment, Captain?"

A smile lit up her face. "Of course... Please..." She indicated the guest chair with her hand.

Peter closed the door, crossed to the chair and sat down.

"Have all my officers died?" Simms asked, still smiling. "How did you get through the squadroom without an uproar?"

Peter smiled and shrugged, just like his father.

"Is shrugging a special course at the temple?"

Peter smiled. "No, it's a requirement—Enigmatic One-Oh-One."

"Well, you look great, Peter... finishing your training seems to have agreed with you."

Peter noted with pleasure that Captain Simms assumed automatically that he had finished it. "It has," he confirmed. Deciding to get straight to the point, he then said, "Now, I want to put that training to good use..."

"Are you going to teach in Chinatown with your father?" she asked.

Peter sensed her emotion. It bolstered his confidence in his decision. "Actually, I was wondering if you might have an opening for a detective..."

Simms reached down and pulled open one of her desk drawers. She removed a couple of items and sat them on her desk. "I held onto these, just in case... Welcome back, Detective Caine."

Brow wrinkled in confusion, Peter reached for his badge and gun. "Thank you, Captain, but...."

"How soon do you want to return to active duty?"

"Would now be too soon?"

"Not at all," Simms said. She tried to hide how pleased she was behind a casual air but Peter felt the emotions she unwittingly broadcasted. "You still have the same desk and I'm sure the Chief has plenty of cases for you."

"Some things never change," Peter replied, standing.

"I'll put through the paperwork that terminates your leave of absence..."

"I resigned," he reminded her.

Simms shrugged, a perfect imitation of Caine. Peter laughed as he headed for the door.

"Detective...?"

Peter turned back to face her.

"I'm glad to have you back," she said, her tone sincere.

"I'm glad to be back," he replied then, exiting her office, he muttered, "You have no idea how glad..."

Before checking in with Strenlich, Peter stuck his head in Kermit's office.

"Hi, Kermit."

Kermit looked up. "Well, the bad penny himself. So, what do I call you now... Father? Priest Peter? Or just plain Master of All He Surveys?"

Peter grinned. "Hmm..." he mused, "I kinda like the ring of that last one..."

"In your dreams."

Peter shook his head. "Yeah, you're right," he said, "I think I like 'Detective' better."

Kermit turned as Peter slid his coat back, revealing his badge and gun. "How does Linus give up his blanket?" Kermit asked, rhetorically.

"I don't know. How?"

"He doesn't!" The two friends grinned at each other. "Welcome back, Peter," Kermit said.

"Thanks—and thank you..."

"For what?"

"For helping to save Paul's life."

Kermit looked at his friend oddly. "Just what do you—"

"You don't want to know," grinned Peter. Kermit... and the rest of his friends... were in for some surprising changes. The last thing Peter wanted was to spoil the surprise!

THE FIVE-O AFFAIR

Bill Koenig

Act I
"Aloha Means a Deadly Bacteria"

Hawaii is only one thousand, five hundred miles from the Equator. People not used to the tropical sun find this out quickly. Rollo Ingstein was already sweating as he approached Customs from the jet that had arrived from Asia.

At six-foot four-inches tall, he towered over many people. His thin features made him stand out more. He was no more than one hundred eighty pounds and looked even thinner. His hairline was receding, adding to the effect. Even the nose was thin. The graying goatee was the only feature that rounded out his face.

Ingstein placed the carry-on bag in front of the Customs clerk, who opened it and briefly looked through the contents. The clerk also looked at Ingstein's passport, which had a phony name.

"Anything to declare?" the clerk asked.

"Nothing," Ingstein replied.

The clerk looked briefly at Ingstein's small, soft-cover suitcase. "OK, go on through."

Without comment, Ingstein picked up his things and left and the clerk started to look at the next person in line.

The clerk had barely noticed a toiletries kit. If he had checked it out, he would have had the chance to handle something that could have ended the life of everyone on the island of Oahu.

Six time zones away, in New York City, Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin walked quickly down a hallway inside the headquarters of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. Each had been in separate areas of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters—Solo in his office, Kuryakin downstairs at a firing range. They had each been given a catchphrase: "Imminent." That was this month's code to drop everything at once—a top-priority mission was about to be assigned.

Kuryakin caught up with Solo a short distance from the office of Alexander Waverly, the Number One of Section One, U.N.C.L.E.'s policy-making group. Waverly was the most senior member of Section One. He did not use these codes without a reason.

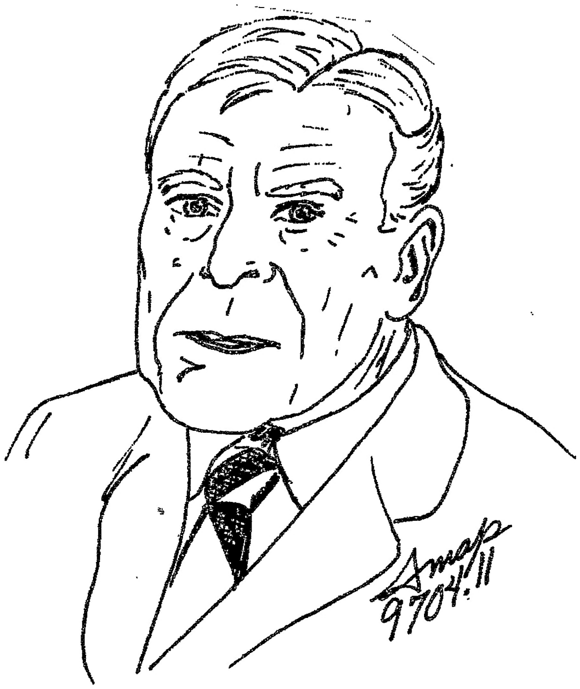
The automatic sliding doors to Waverly's office opened. In came Solo, dressed in a dark blue suit, followed by Kuryakin in shirt sleeves, shoulder holster and dark slacks. Solo also wore a holster underneath his jacket. Both also wore their UNCLE badges, Solo with his familiar number eleven on it and Kuryakin with his number two.

Waverly was standing, looking down at papers on his large, round conference table. He didn't notice Solo and Kuryakin for a moment until he looked up.

"Sit down, gentlemen. I don't know what plans you have for the next few days, but you'd better cancel them," Waverly said as he sat down.

Waverly flipped a switch on a control console on the table. A large screen came down from the ceiling. A few moments later, an image of a man appeared. Solo guessed the man was either approaching or in his middle thirties. He had dark, thinning hair. He also had a haggard look. It appeared he had a day's growth of beard in the picture.

"Gentlemen, this is—was—Alexander Kline," Waverly began. "Reportedly, one of the most brilliant people on earth. He was a biochemist. Some years back, he was looking to create a vaccine that would wipe out all known disease. Instead, he discovered something quite different. A bacteria capable of eliminating all life. His government, the United States government, put him to work. After nearly suffering a breakdown, he disappeared."



Waverly hit the switch again. The image changed. Now on the screen were pictures of three cows, swollen and disfigured. "A year later, he surfaced, in Hawaii," Waverly resumed. "This was the result of a test he conducted. The carcasses were absolutely petrified with lesions all about them. Despite various treaties, many of the world's major powers maintain some kind of capacity to use bacteriological warfare if they ever need it. Alexander Kline wanted them all to stop. And to make them stop, he intended to kill all life on Oahu. His bacteria, once created, would survive only six hours. But in that time, every man, woman and child on that island would have died a horrible, painful death."

"What happened?" Solo said.

"Kline had a change of heart. Unfortunately, his sample of the bacteria got away from him. Luckily, only one young man died from exposure to the bacteria. The authorities managed to locate it. Kline himself was on the scene and assisted them. However, he got too close to the sample and died himself. The sample was finally destroyed by fire."

"I take it the story does not end there," Kuryakin said.

"Quite true, Mister Kuryakin," Waverly said. "For years, no more work was performed concerning Mister Kline's project. Until recently, that is." Waverly flipped the switch once more. Solo and Kuryakin saw a man with a narrow head and goatee appear on the screen. "Rollo Ingstein, another U.S. researcher. Almost as brilliant as Kline. Unfortunately, far less principled. You see gentlemen, Ingstein bolted the American government about two months ago."

"You say Mister Ingstein is far less principled than Alexander Kline," Solo said. "I assume he is doing something with this bacteria for personal gain."

"Quite right, Mister Solo. Various agencies, including ourselves, believe Ingstein is setting up an auction for this bacteria, known as a Q strain. Further, in a note of irony, we believe it will take place in Hawaii, probably in less than a week."

"Why Hawaii?" Kuryakin asked.

"We don't know for certain. Perhaps he felt it was a centralized location for bidders from the either the East or West. It really doesn't matter," Waverly said. "What does matter is that the bacteria is drawing attention from governments and criminal organizations. Already, there has been one confirmed sighting. I believe you'll recognize the gentleman."

Waverly hit the switch once more. A middle-aged, balding man appeared. Solo sat up in his chair. "G. Emory Partridge? I thought he was dead, killed by Thrush."

"Yes," Kuryakin said. "He had failed Thrush on that business in the Yukon several years ago. He had hired himself out to Thrush. We left him there, knowing Thrush officials were due only a short time later."

"Obviously Mister Partridge proved to be more adept than you gentlemen gave him credit for," Waverly said. "He showed up in Los Angeles twenty-four hours ago. Unfortunately, he wasn't identified until he left that city on a plane headed toward Hawaii. There's no way of telling whether he is working independently or for Thrush again. But if Mister Partridge is involved, you can be sure trouble will soon follow."

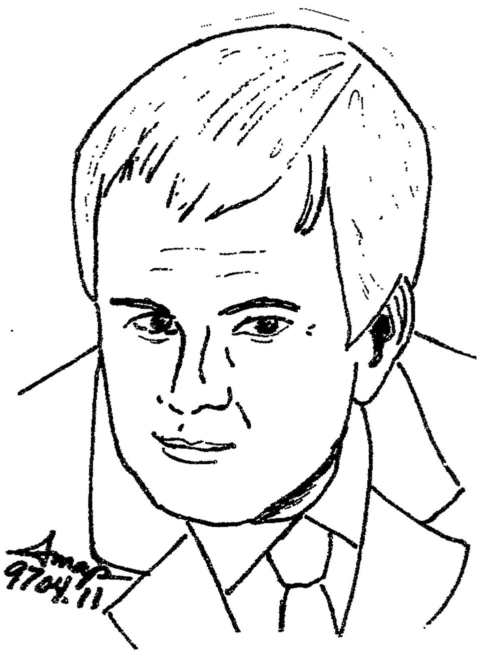
"What, exactly, do you want us to do, sir?" Solo said. "Are we to recover the bacteria or destroy it?"

"Destroy, as promptly as possible," Waverly said. "This may conflict with your own governments, gentlemen. There are already signs that Russia has dispatched an operative to explore obtaining the bacteria. And the

Americans are certainly going to try and get it back."

The images on the screen changed again. This time, there were pictures of two men. On the left was a somewhat heavy bald man, with a handlebar mustache. On the right, a middle-aged, clean-shaven man with graying blond hair.

"To the left is Colonel Mikhail Toptegan, who goes by Mischa," Waverly began.



"Yes, I've heard of him," Kuryakin said. "An old warhorse but with very adept survival instincts. KGB office politics can be a bit brutal but he usually ends up on top."

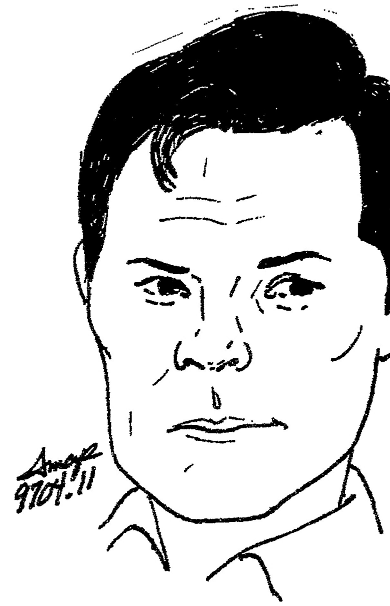
"Colonel Toptegan is either en route or shortly will be," Waverly said. "The man on the right is one Jonathan Kaye, director of Asia-Pacific intelligence for the American Pentagon. He departed in an Air Force jet this morning for Hawaii."

Waverly changed the image one last time. Now, another man appeared. He had few distinguishing physical characteristics, but there was something about the photo, a rigidity, a feeling of authority.

"There's at least one more wild card to consider," Waverly said. "This man, Stephen McGarrett, heads a Hawaii state police agency known as Hawaii Five-O. A bit of a mystery man. Although he is only a state official, he has enormous influence on matters related to security and intelligence. It may just be force of personality. You'll get a complete dossier, but Mister McGarrett is extremely tough. If you don't let him in, he'll force his way in. He also, apparently, enjoys a close relationship with Mister Kaye. Kaye has, at times, in effect, deputized Hawaii Five-O to work on security matters. There have even been some funny rumors that McGarrett himself may secretly be a U.S. government operative, but that has never been proven. In any event, I suspect you will encounter Mister McGarrett and his people at some point in this affair."

"Sir, what if it looks like a 'friendly' power is about to gain control of the bacteria?" Solo said.

"That would not be an acceptable outcome, Mister Solo."



Shortly after noon, Honolulu time, Steve McGarrett walked down the steps of the Iolani Palace. Normally, McGarrett would catch a bit of lunch at his desk. But things had been quiet lately, quiet enough that he had decided on the luxury, for him, of a lunch out of the office. McGarrett was still slipping on the jacket to his light gray, summer-weight suit as he left the palace. He looked toward his car, a refurbished 1974 Mercury. McGarrett, always a bit of a traditionalist, had never warmed to the smoothed-edge "jellybean" look of modern automobiles. He had always been fond of Mercurys, so he had invested in having one redone. It had cost quite a bit, but McGarrett had no family, just his job. All he needed was the time—the toughest thing for him to swing—but he had restored the car on weekends.

He was now down the steps and almost to his car. Just then, a large sedan screeched to a halt just in front of him. McGarrett turned and, for a second, braced to respond. Out of the sedan came two men dressed in dark suits—not the best clothing for Hawaii, McGarrett thought—and wearing sunglasses. McGarrett didn't recognize the specific men, but he recognized the type.

"Let me guess: Jonathan Kaye is in town."

"It's an emergency, sir," one of the men replied.

"Figures," McGarrett said. "The governor's office?"

"Yes sir."

The trio walked a short distance to the nearby Capitol Building, where Gov. George Hitoshi had his office. Kaye's men were silent and McGarrett had no reason to make conversation. This was typical of Jonathan Kaye, McGarrett thought. Kaye typically stayed put at the Pentagon. When he jetted to Hawaii, that meant something large was about to break. McGarrett and Kaye had known each other for years. They were friends, more or less. But Kaye also seemed to throw his weight around at key moments. The escort probably wasn't necessary, but McGarrett played along.

They entered the building and walked briskly to Gov. Hitoshi's office. Inside, McGarrett recognized the governor and Kaye. He also had met the third person, a middle-aged bald man, years ago. His presence was big trouble, McGarrett thought.

"Steve, glad you could make it," Kaye said. Gesturing toward the bald man, Kaye said, "You remember A.L. Benjamin, don't you?"

"How could I forget? The dead cows at Makapuu," McGarrett said coldly.

In an instant, he remembered the entire case. How three swollen, dead cows had led to a manhunt for Alexander Kline, the troubled inventor of a deadly bacteria. Benjamin had been Kline's superior at Fort Dietrich, Maryland, where Kline had worked on the bacterial weapon project.

Benjamin sensed McGarrett was ill at ease. "Yes, it has been a long time," he said.

"I guess it would be naive to ask whether this has something to do with Alexander Kline," McGarrett said.

Kaye gestured over to a conference table on the other side of the room. "It's worse, actually. Please sit down."

The men approached the table and sat. McGarrett's frown was visible. He had watched Alexander Kline die. Kline had grabbed a vial containing a solution full of the bacteria from a shack and buried it in a shallow hole on a beach. Those few moments had permitted a U.S. Army unit equipped with a flamethrower to arrive before the bacteria could spread. The operator of the flamethrower burned down the shack, then destroyed the vial. But for Kline, it was too late. McGarrett had to hold back a woman—Wanda Russell, was her name—who had fallen in love with Kline. They both watched as lesions erupted all over Kline's body.

The governor's voice broke McGarrett's concentration on the memory.

"Mister Kaye, please tell me about this Makapuu incident," Hitoshi said.

"Some years ago, as Steve reminds us, an Alexander Kline developed what was called the Q strain—a bacteria hostile to all forms of life. As some of us here remember, Kline wanted to make a point to the world—a warning—by using the bacteria on the island of Oahu. Kline, thank God, had a change of heart and the bacteria was destroyed before it could spread. Doctor Kline, unfortunately, did not survive the incident. And that appeared to be that."

Kaye took a photo from a folder in front of him. "Just recently, this man, one Rollo Ingstein, a microbiologist in the employ of the United States government, revived the Kline research and found some scraps of information that survived Kline. More recently, he left without warning. We believe, unfortunately, he has the capability to produce a new version of the Q strain. Moreover, data from a variety of sources indicate he is going to auction it off—right here in Hawaii."

"I thought treaties and such prohibited our government and others from developing biological warfare weapons," McGarrett said coldly.

"Yes, that is developing, as in production," Benjamin said. "But there is little in place to prevent basic research. And, in any case, Ingstein had disguised his project. A new version of the Q strain had not been authorized by me or anyone else at Fort Dietrich."

"Regardless, we believe the new Q strain exists and may be deadlier than the original," Kaye said. "It must not get into the wrong hands. And some of the wrong hands are already en route to Hawaii." Kaye took another picture from the file of a middle-aged man. "This is one G. Emory Partridge. We know he left for Hawaii from Los Angeles. A known criminal, thought deceased, he has worked both independently and for major criminal organizations on major projects. That can't be coincidence. An old acquaintance of yours, Steve, may also be in the hunt." Out came another picture.

McGarrett recognized the picture instantly. "Colonel Toptegan of the KGB," McGarrett said.

Kaye stood up. "It's imperative we recover that bacteria, Steve. I need your help. You've never let me down before."

McGarrett cleared his throat. "We're looking for something that, in all likelihood, can be hidden almost anywhere. I'll give it my best shot, Jonathan, but you're not exactly making it easy. And I'm not real big on recovering the bacteria."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'd rather just destroy the damn stuff like we did originally."

"If necessary, of course," Kaye said. "But our first preference is recovery of both the bacteria and our defecting scientist."

"Who else might be looking?"

"We're not sure, yet. Besides the usual government and criminal types, some organizations considered friendly may become involved. While en route here, I was informed the U-N-C-L-E had been making inquiries," Kaye said.

"U.N.C.L.E., eh?" McGarrett said. "The last time I heard, U.N.C.L.E. was an organization supported by our government with both money and personnel."

"True enough," Kaye said. He sat back down and reached once more into the file folder. "U.N.C.L.E. pursues an independent, albeit law enforcement-oriented, agenda. I'm not comfortable with the idea of U.N.C.L.E. getting to the Q strain first. If they do become involved, they're likely to send one or both of these men."

Kaye passed the pictures to McGarrett. The first was of a clean-shaven man with dark hair, basically good-looking. The other was of a blond man, his hair in a style with short bangs.

"Napoleon Solo is the first gentleman, the top enforcement officer of U.N.C.L.E., an American. The other is Illya Kuryakin, a Russian who has been stationed at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters in New York for many years. They often work together, but not always. On an assignment of this magnitude, they are the agents U.N.C.L.E. would most likely assign. Also, U.N.C.L.E. has assigned both men in the past to oppose projects sponsored by Mister Partridge. I can't see how they would not become involved in this matter."

"What do I do if this Solo or Kuryakin gets to the Q strain first?" McGarrett said.

"I would rather they didn't," Kaye said. "I don't dare chance it, not with stakes like this."

Solo had just gotten off the telephone at the desk in his office. He had just completed his travel arrangements to Hawaii.

"So you managed to secure two first-class seats?" Kuryakin asked.

"Don't I always?"

"Let's just say you know what to say to female travel agents."

Solo's face dropped all hints of levity. "Illya, this affair really bothers me."

Amap
9704.11

"Why is that? Just because we will be thousands of miles from the nearest U.N.C.L.E. station? Just because we have to find what is most likely a small container that can be hidden almost anywhere? And just because ourselves, other governments and other known criminals are looking for the same thing? And what we're all looking for is an incredibly deadly bacteria that could wipe out millions of people?"

"Something like that," Solo said.

"Good reason to worry," Kuryakin replied. "How do you suggest we proceed?"

"I hate to say it, but given the time constraints, one or both of us will make ourselves targets and hope one of the bidders goes after us. Then, we hopefully disarm said bidder and secure information—at least add to the skimpy information we already have."

"I think I've heard this plan before," Kuryakin said. "It can often be painful—especially for my head."

Solo frowned at Kuryakin. "Sometimes mine too," he said. "Unfortunately, given the time constraints, we don't have much choice. I think we should use one of the basic covers—something that wouldn't take too long for someone in the intelligence field to break."

"Agreed," Kuryakin said. "The problem this time may not come from the opposition but our so-called allies. Both the United States and Russia are benefactors of U.N.C.L.E. but I suspect neither Mister Kaye nor Colonel Toptegan will make it easy for us."

Act II

"Aloha Means Knockout Gas."

McGarrett hurriedly walked up the steps of the Iolani Palace to the second floor. He quickly reached the Five-O office. He entered and as he walked by a series of three cubicles, he tapped at the walls of each. After passing the third he came to the desk of his secretary, a woman in her late thirties. "May, hold all my calls."

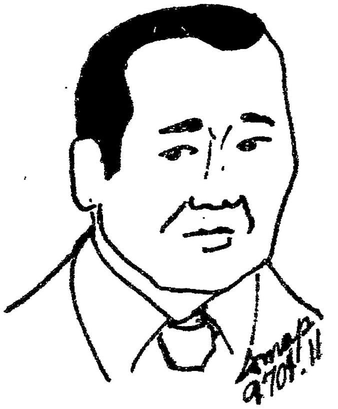
By now, three men had emerged from the cubicles. They were familiar with the drill and knew McGarrett wanted their attention right now. Each was in shirt sleeves, not even wasting a moment to put on their suit jackets. Kono Kalakaua, a big beefy native Hawaiian, entered McGarrett's office first. He officially listed his weight at two hundred forty pounds, but that was at least twenty pounds under his real weight. Next in was Chin Ho Kelly, somewhat lighter, but no one would ever call him svelte. His odd name stemmed from his Chinese and Irish ancestry. The last in was Dan Williams, about five-foot-eight, with a far more athletic build than his other two colleagues. Although Williams was in his thirties, his boyish looks and blond hair caused some people to mistake him for a younger man, perhaps just out of college.

"Gentlemen, this is top priority," McGarrett said, coming, as always, directly to the point. "I'm sure you all remember Alexander Kline and his killer bacteria. A microbiologist formerly in the employ of Uncle Sam apparently has decided to revive Kline's research and is auctioning off a sample. He's probably on the islands already. Some interesting bidders are either here or on the way. The job's simple enough—nab the man in question and the bacteria."

"What's this person's name and do we have a picture of him?" Williams asked.

"The name is Rollo Ingstein and some shots of our would-be entrepreneur are on their way over. So are pictures of other people being attracted by Ingstein's offering, including friendly and unfriendly. It's quite a list and I'm sure it's just the start."

"What do you mean by friendly, boss?" Kelly said.



"People who are officially friendly with the United States but are not considered, by our people anyway, as the kind who should get the bacteria. Our old friend Colonel Toptegan from Russia may want to inspect the merchandise. And I've been told by Jonathan Kaye it's likely some other international agencies may poke their head in it. Ever hear of the U-N-C-L-E?"

"My favorite charity," Kono said, deadpan.

McGarrett grinned. "Wrong folks. A fancy outfit also known as the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. They specialize in cloak-and-dagger stuff and often have tricks up their sleeves. Officially, the United States supports U.N.C.L.E. But Kaye and his people don't trust them. Kaye would prefer Five-O or U.S. agencies coordinating through us to get there first. Anyway, I've got some pictures of some U.N.C.L.E. types on their way over."

"Okay, Steve. What do we do?" Williams said.

"I want Chin and Kono to go with some plainclothes HPD officers and keep an eye out at the airport. If any of our cast of characters shows up, I want them tailed. That's friendly or unfriendly. I want to know what these people are up to. At least one potential bidder is already here, a gent by the name of Partridge. I'm told he's fairly deadly despite his country gentleman looks." McGarrett now turned to Williams. "Danno, I want you here to coordinate with the FBI, Naval Intelligence and others. Kaye has set it up. The list of contacts is coming over with the photos. I want you on that phone constantly, checking with everyone. I'll split my time here and out in the field checking on leads. Questions?"

"How much time do we have?" Williams asked.

"At the most, a few days. Let's not waste time, gentlemen."

Solo and Kuryakin sat in the first-class cabin of TransGlobal Flight Seven-Sixty-one. About an hour away from Honolulu, Solo awakened after dozing. He was wearing a light gray suit, his tie slightly askew. Kuryakin was dressed somewhat more casually, with a blue sport jacket and a light blue golf shirt and dark blue slacks. He was wearing a pair of glasses so he could read some scientific journal that Solo didn't recognize.

"Hmmm, slept longer than I thought. Are we getting close?" Solo said.

Kuryakin glanced at his watch. "I'd say sixty-eight minutes. Given any more thought to our approach or do we just wing it?"

"Well, I'd say our best shot is to isolate Emory Partridge. He has a bit of a score to settle with us and hopefully we can draw him out in the open. Although..."

"Although what?" Kuryakin said.

"Partridge goes underground for years. He's apparently well hidden because no law enforcement agency of any kind in the world reports his whereabouts. Suddenly he's out in the open."

"This Q strain is quite a powerful inducement. Perhaps he was yearning for one last criminal undertaking," Kuryakin said as he took his glasses off and placed them in the breast pocket of his jacket.

"Perhaps," Solo said. "But I can't help but think there's more to it than that. I wonder if he's working for someone else."

"That's not out of the question," Kuryakin said. "After all, he acted as a Thrush contractor all those years ago in the Yukon."

"Somehow I doubt he's working for Thrush," Solo replied. "He evidently escaped their brand of justice but I can't imagine our bird friends being the type to forgive and forget."

"Who else might it be—if he's acting for someone else?" Kuryakin said.

"No way of knowing," Solo said. "That's another reason I'd like to isolate our Mister Partridge if we can."

It was the second day—actually first full day—that Kono Kalakaua had been on the airport duty. None of the men he was looking for had shown up. Suddenly, there they were—the American and the Russian had entered the main terminal. Kono reached the small walkie-talkie in his pocket.

"Kono to Chin, have a sighting. Over."

"Kono, this is Chin," his Five-O colleague responded. "Who is it? Over."

"The men from U.N.C.L.E.," Kono said. "Both of them. They have just entered the main terminal building. The American is wearing a gray suit and tie, for crying out loud. The Russian is dressed in a sport jacket and plain golf shirt, over."

"You stay close to them. I'll get the car and pick you up out front. Chin out."

Kono had already started following the pair. They were headed for baggage pickup. Each already carried a small carry-on bag and had only one piece of luggage to pick up from the carousel. Kono was perhaps thirty feet away. He was trying to blend in. He wore a typical brightly-colored Hawaiian shirt with his plain gray slacks. But Kono, because of his size, never easily blended in anywhere. However, the terminal was quite busy because at least two large flights had arrived at nearly the same time. It was so crowded that Kono hoped the U.N.C.L.E. agents would not spot him.

Kono watched them head toward the exit where rental car agencies sent buses. He then exited through a door near the rental car pickup station. He scanned around and spotted Chin Ho Kelly who was driving a blue Ford Taurus through the lane where cars dropped off passengers. Kono waved and Chin quickly pulled up.

"They're just now getting a Hertz bus," Kono said as he got in.

Chin Ho moved up behind the Hertz bus. Kono, meanwhile, started broadcasting on the police radio in the Taurus.

"Central, patch me through to McGarrett," Kono said. "This is car four. Over."

"Just a moment, car four," the dispatcher replied.

A moment's pause. "McGarrett. What's up, Kono? Over."

"Our relatives just showed up. The two uncles. Over," he said.

"Both uncles? Over."

"Yes, sir. The dark-haired one apparently is a sharpie since he's dressed in a suit and he is with his yellow-haired friend, over."

"Status? Over."

"They're on their way to pick up a rental car. Should be at the rental agency in another two, three minutes. Over."

"Stick with them, Kono," McGarrett said. "Let's see what they're up to. McGarrett out."

Chin pulled up near the exit where the rental cars left the lot. A fence obscured their view of the lot itself but they'd be able to watch each rental car depart. Both watched intently.

Solo and Kuryakin stowed their bags in the trunk of the white Ford Thunderbird. Kuryakin offered to drive and Solo got into the passenger seat.

They pulled out of the lot and onto a street. It would be a short drive to H1, the main highway into town. Kuryakin noticed the tail almost immediately. A Ford Taurus was hanging terribly close to them. "We have company already but neither of those men look familiar to me," Kuryakin said.

Solo, without looking back, glanced at the side mirror outside the passenger door. Kuryakin adjusted that mirror so Solo could observe the tail. He saw two men; the driver looked to be of Chinese descent while the passenger was a native Hawaiian.

"I think they're with Hawaii Five-O, the state police unit Mister Waverly told us about. I studied up on their dossiers. The driver, if I remember correctly, is Chin Ho Kelly."

"Chin Ho Kelly?" Kuryakin said.

"A long story," Solo replied. "The big Hawaiian is Kono Kalakaua. They both work for Steve McGarrett."

"They could use some road manners," Kuryakin said. "They're probably no more than two carlengths behind me."

"Well, since Mister McGarrett wants to keep track of us, I suggest we drop in for a quick visit," Solo said. "Do you think you can get to the Iolani Palace?"

"I'll manage."

Thirty minutes later, Kono got on the police radio once more and was patched through to McGarrett.

"Go, Kono," McGarrett said.

"You're not going to believe this, boss," Kono said. "But it looks like they're getting ready to pull up to the Palace parking lot. Over."

"The Iolani Palace? Over."

"The same. Over."

"Okay, pull up a discreet distance behind them. I doubt they're going to be sightseeing. McGarrett out."

Kuryakin had managed to find a visitor's parking spot with surprising ease. He pulled in and glanced in the rearview mirror once more. The police tail was a short distance away.

"Our company has pulled up and stopped, as well," Kuryakin said.

"Wonderful," Solo replied. "I'll drop in on Mister McGarrett and perhaps you could have a chat with our friends and encourage them to alter their travel plans."

"Well, let's see," Kuryakin said. "Our U.N.C.L.E. specials are still in the hidden compartments of our luggage. I doubt I'd have time to get them out and reload them with sleep darts."

"Well, we're each loaded up with some new U.N.C.L.E. devices," Solo said.

"Yes, but I think using those special napalm capsules is a bit too extreme," Kuryakin said. He wasn't joking. Both men were walking around with incendiary capsules that could almost instantly start an intense fire. It was part of their gear to deal with the Q strain should they get close to it.

"Quite true. How about the watch?" Solo asked.

Kuryakin nodded his head. "Yes, I'd say the watch might work."

"Give me ten or fifteen minutes first. I'll meet you back here."

Two minutes later, Solo walked casually into the Five-O offices. He spotted the secretary and handed her an official U.N.C.L.E. identification card.

"Excuse me, I don't have an appointment but I was wondering if I could see Mister McGarrett. I'm with the U-N-C-L-E. Napoleon Solo."

May looked puzzled at the card. "Is that really your name?"

"Scout's honor," Solo said. "My parents were fond of famous generals."

"Er, let me buzz," May replied. She flicked the switch of the intercom. "Boss, it's Mister Solo of the U-N-C-L-E."

"Send him in," McGarrett said in an emotionless voice.

May motioned Solo toward the door to McGarrett's office.

Dan Williams stood next to McGarrett, who was sitting at his desk. They appeared to be going over some list or report. "That's about it for now," Williams said to McGarrett.

"Fine, Danno, keep at it," McGarrett said. Williams left and only then did McGarrett look up at Solo. "Come in, Mister Solo. Coffee?"

"No thanks, I had plenty on the plane."

"What brings you to Hawaii, Mister Solo? You don't look dressed for a vacation."

"Actually I suspect the same thing as what you were discussing with your associate—the whereabouts of Rollo Ingstein and the Q strain," Solo said.

"What is that, Mister Solo?" McGarrett said.

"Considering that Jonathan Kaye jetted into Hawaii yesterday, I'm pretty sure you already know," Solo replied. "And considering that two more of your associates followed me from the airport, I figured you wanted to check up on me. So I came here directly."

"Well, all of that is official police business, Mister Solo. I'm afraid I can't discuss it."

"Law enforcement agencies usually cooperate with U.N.C.L.E.," Solo said.

"I'm afraid I haven't been authorized to do so," McGarrett shot back.

"Fine, then," Solo said. "If that's how you want to play it. But if you're curious about U.N.C.L.E.'s intentions, I'll make them clear. My top priority is to destroy the Q strain. Pure and simple. No hidden agendas."

McGarrett frowned. "Why do you insist on bringing this up?"

"I'd like to think we're really working on the same side in all this. From what I've read, you've seen the effects of the bacteria first hand. You know what it can do and you helped destroy it once. I just thought I'd put my cards on the table as a courtesy."

McGarrett sat back in his chair. "I've been given a job to do, Mister Solo. I aim to see it get done. Also, no one is above the law in Hawaii. No one. Do you understand?"

"Certainly," Solo said as he started toward the door. He began to open it but paused as he began to walk out. "One suggestion, however. Surveillance is best performed when you are more than two carlengths from the subject ahead of you." With that, Solo closed the door.

McGarrett leaned back in the chair. *What the devil did he mean by that last remark?* He paused for a moment and rubbed his eyes. Actually, Solo's goals were probably closer to his own. McGarrett was indeed wary of trying to preserve the Q strain. But he would wait before making a firm decision, one way or another.

Something began to eat at McGarrett. He got up from the desk and walked to his office balcony. He could see the parking lot from there. McGarrett scanned the area and saw Solo enter the passenger side of a Ford Thunderbird. The car pulled away but he didn't see Chin and Kono.

A few minutes earlier, Kuryakin had gotten out of the Thunderbird and started walking toward the Taurus with Chin Ho and Kono inside.

"Excuse me, but do either of you gentleman have the time?" Kuryakin asked, now just a step from Chin's car. He seemed to be directing his remarks to Chin, who had the driver's window rolled down.

Chin and Kono looked at each other for a moment. Even when they were spotted by a suspect, that person didn't usually just come up and make polite conversation.

"Do you have the time?" Kuryakin said, as he brought his left wrist near Chin's face. "My watch seems to have stopped."

A second later, the watch emitted a jet of gas, which filled the front seat of the Taurus. The two started to move but then stopped, as if frozen. Kuryakin nonchalantly walked back to his rental car. Just a minute or so later, Solo came down the Palace steps and the Thunderbird pulled out of the Palace parking lot.

Dan Williams rushed down the palace steps perhaps two minutes after the Thunderbird left. He ran to the Taurus. He couldn't see anything wrong but Chin and Kono didn't seem to move. He reached in through the open driver's window and shook Chin.

"What?" Chin said.

Kono snapped out of it, just a few seconds later. "Where'd the Russian go?" he asked.

"Out of the parking lot a few minutes ago," Williams said.

Chin grimaced. "He gassed us," he said.

Williams waved at McGarrett, who was still standing at the balcony. "They're okay," he called. "Be up in a minute."

"You stay, I'm coming down," McGarrett shouted.

Minutes later, McGarrett had talked to his men. "Apparently, it was some sort of stun gas," McGarrett said. "No damage but apparently something that disorients you for a few minutes."

"Why, Steve?" Williams asked.

"I think that was Mister Solo's way of telling me to back off," McGarrett said. "But I don't back off, Danno."

Act III
"Aloha Means A Blow to the Head"

Solo and Kuryakin checked into the Ilikai, perhaps the most famous of the many tourist hotels in Honolulu. They had adjoining rooms on the tenth floor. They unpacked and retrieved their U.N.C.L.E. specials and shoulder holsters from the hidden compartments in their suitcases which permitted their weapons to go undetected at airports. After a few minutes they convened in Solo's room.

"How shall we divide up our assignments?" Kuryakin said.

"I'll look for Partridge," Solo said. "Knowing his tastes, I doubt he'll settle for a lesser hotel. Nothing subtle. I'll simply go to each hotel, identify myself as an U.N.C.L.E. agent and show around pictures of Partridge. That should draw his attention."

"Fair enough," Kuryakin said. "And me?"

"Do you think you can blend into the scenery? Approach perhaps the less savory areas of Honolulu?"

"I thought you might devise something like that. As a matter of fact, I brought a few things. Nothing like Asian makeup—that's very difficult to pull off. But I have a few things that can alter my appearance."

Solo looked at his watch. "It's four o'clock now. I might as well get started."

"Fine," Kuryakin said. "I'll get a lay of the land now. I'll find a discreet cab driver and look over areas I'll visit tomorrow when I use the makeup."

"Good. Check back on the pen communicator every two hours."

McGarrett walked quickly through the main terminal to the Customs area. He had timed it just about right. As he arrived, Russia's Colonel Toptegan—Mischa—was picking up his bags and heading out. Mischa was dressed in clothes very much like those he had worn the first time he had come to Hawaii—a white suit, black tie and white hat.

Mischa spotted McGarrett immediately. "Greetings, Colonel," McGarrett said. "I thought we'd get reacquainted."

"Well, well, Stephen McGarrett. Still greeting visitors to Hawaii?" Mischa said in a stiff Russian accent. McGarrett guessed Mischa was using it for effect. Mischa always had been a bit theatrical.

"As I said once before, all visitors from the KGB," McGarrett said.

The two men started walking together through the terminal. "You know, we officially reorganized," Mischa said.

"Yes, but KGB has such a ring to it, I'm afraid no other name will ever take hold," McGarrett said.

"Touchй."

"What brings you to Hawaii, Colonel?"

"I don't suppose saying 'the sun and surf' will satisfy you?"

"Not a chance," McGarrett said. "I think it's the Q strain."

"I'm sorry but I am still not up on your American slang."

"I think you know about this slang, Colonel. It refers to something bad, very bad. Not the kind of thing you discuss casually in a public place."

Mischa smiled. "You give me far too much credit, Stephen."

McGarrett stopped. "Let's cut out the bull, Mischa. I don't have the time. You're here to see if you can purchase the Q strain. You're up against a lot of potential bidders. Remember the business that first brought you to these islands? The perfect twenty-dollar counterfeit plates? You were a stalking horse then, Colonel. And with your government's precarious finances, I doubt you can be top bidder now."

"Perhaps," Mischa said. "But why should I cooperate with you in any event? You have manpower and resources. I am just one man."

"Yes, but you have an invitation to bid," McGarrett said.

"Given the relatively good relations between our governments, you could do a lot worse if someone other than I were to obtain it—hypothetically speaking, of course, since I really don't know what you're talking about."

"First, given the rather fluid situation in your government, I'm not sure that's the best destination for the Q strain," McGarrett said. "In any case, I have my instructions. My main job is to protect the lives of the people of this state. I'll do that any way I can."

"I am sure you will," Mischa replied. "May I go now?"

"Of course."

"Can I expect an escort from the airport?"

"Certainly."

"I hope this time your men will be a little more subtle about it."

McGarrett frowned. "Somebody else has already lectured me on that point. And one of your countrymen conducted a demonstration."

"My countryman?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" McGarrett said. "The U-N-C-L-E is also snooping around on this business. An American and a Russian."

"Let me guess," Mischa said. "That wouldn't happen to be Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin, would it?"

"Know them?"

"Only by reputation, unfortunately," Mischa said. "Kuryakin would have made a fine operative for my, eh, firm but he ended up being assigned to the U-N-C-L-E as part of the old regime's contribution to that organization. Really, too bad. We could have used him."

"You may yet have a chance to strike up an acquaintance, then," McGarrett said. "Good day."

Kuryakin glanced around. He was in the Chinatown section of the city. It was now nearly five-thirty. Kuryakin had drawn a mental map of Honolulu's underbelly and had a good idea where he could make some discreet inquiries.

Then he spotted Partridge.

The tall Englishman, dressed impeccably in a suit, as usual, was across the street. Kuryakin looked down, hoping he hadn't been spotted. But Partridge was turning to his left into a restaurant that had a large sign saying, "Chop Suey."

The street was busy with late afternoon traffic but Kuryakin jay-walked across anyway. He went to an alley to the side of the restaurant and took out the pen communicator. He quickly adjusted it to send directly to Napoleon Solo's communicator. Normally, Kuryakin would first call through an U.N.C.L.E. regional office. But there was none in Hawaii.

"Solo here," Napoleon's voice said through the receiver.

"Napoleon, your subject is in Chinatown. He has just entered a Chinese restaurant. A bit below Mister Partridge's normal culinary standards. I'm going to follow." Kuryakin gave Solo the address.

"All right, then," Solo said. "But be careful. I'll be over as soon as I can. Solo out."

Kuryakin entered and spotted an empty booth near the front entrance. He quickly sat down in the booth to get his bearings. An Asian waitress approached him.

"Just one this evening?"

"Actually, I'm looking for a friend, a tall gentleman."

The waitress looked around. It wasn't very busy yet. "A tall gentleman sat down just a minute ago in the rear booth. If you'd like, I--"

"No thanks, I'll greet him on my own. I'll just order coffee and take it back there."

The waitress's nose wrinkled as if she were puzzled. She complied, bringing him a cup of coffee. Kuryakin then walked back, keeping his head down at another booth, two booths away from where Partridge should be. It was quiet in the restaurant and Kuryakin could hear Partridge's voice.

"I must say, it has gone very much as you predicted it would," Partridge said.

"Of course," said another voice. Kuryakin squinted. The diction was perfect but Kuryakin concluded the voice belonged to an Asian man, probably Chinese. "My information is the authorities are quite excited about the resurfacing of the mysterious G. Emory Partridge."

"The authorities wouldn't include the U-N-C-L-E, would they?" Partridge asked the mystery man.

"U-N? Oh, U.N.C.L.E. There were indications that a couple of agents were en route. But my information doesn't go beyond that."

"I was rather hoping I could extract a bit of revenge if it were the right two agents," Partridge said. "These two particular chaps have cost me dearly. I had a rather large transaction with an independent group a few years ago. They ruined it. I had to go into hiding, supporting myself with various minor criminal undertakings."

"I can assure you, you will be very well paid, Mister Partridge," said the other voice.

"Of course, Wo Fat." Partridge said. "When is tomorrow's auction?"

"Precisely at three. The yacht will leave the dock at two," Wo Fat said.

"Then I shall make myself known at one. I'm sure it will be easy enough to pick up a police escort. From what you've told me, the police have quite a contingent at the airport."

Kuryakin swallowed quietly. Napoleon was right. Partridge is not only working for someone else—this Wo Fat—but is nothing more than a well-known decoy. Kuryakin slid the pen communicator out of his pocket and set it up to transmit. "Napoleon," he whispered. "Acknowledge, but quietly."

There was a pause. "Solo here," came over in a low voice.

"Your theory is correct about Partridge. He is working for someone named Wo Fat. Ask the home office for all information. Also, the auction is tomorrow, aboard a yacht. It leaves at two o'clock and they will have the auction at three, somewhere out at sea. Kuryakin out."

Illya sipped his coffee, left a five-dollar bill, got up and walked to the door. He hoped with his back to Partridge he could get out of the restaurant unnoticed. He got to the door and took a sharp left. He decided to walk to the corner where he could radio Solo again. After a couple of steps, he felt a tap on the shoulder.

As he turned around, Kuryakin felt the blow to the side of the neck. It was a tall crew-cut Chinese man dressed in a black suit. He caught Kuryakin as he fell. Almost at the same moment, a large sedan pulled up to the curb. The Chinese man stuffed Kuryakin into the back seat.

Act IV

"Aloha Means....The End?"

Solo's car pulled up at the restaurant. He looked around the exterior but saw no sign of Kuryakin. Solo walked inside. It was now almost six.

"Help you, sir?" an Asian waitress said to Solo

"I'm looking for a friend a mine, a blond fellow."

"Sorry, he's gone. Just had coffee. Tipped well, though," she said.

Solo frowned. "That's Illya, all right. So he left, you say?"

"Yes, little while ago."

Solo went back outside and looked around. It was still bright outside. He looked a bit further up the street. There, a half block away, was the same Ford Taurus that had tailed him from the airport. Apparently a man from Five-O had gotten back on the trail. No big surprise. Solo had been fairly conspicuous in announcing his presence the past two hours among the main tourist hotels.

Solo rubbed his chin. Presumably, something had happened to Illya. If that were the case, Kuryakin would have been relieved of the communicator. Even if he still had the communicator, calling him now would do no good. A call from Solo would alert Kuryakin's captors to the device.

He looked up again at the Taurus. The big Hawaiian officer was inside. "It may be time to eat a little crow," Solo said to himself.

Solo walked up the street to the Taurus, waving the last few steps. Kono Kalakaua braced, expecting a trick.

Solo took the handkerchief from the breast pocket of his suit and waved it as a flag of truce. "Can you get me in touch with your boss? I think he's going to want to hear this," Solo said.

Kono frowned. "Stay outside for a minute," he said to Solo. He then took the police radio receiver. "Central, patch me through to McGarrett. Over."

A moment's pause. "McGarrett here. Over."

"This is Kono. I re-established contact with one of the U.N.C.L.E. men. He had been driving around the tourist hotels. He's waving his handkerchief and says he needs to talk to you. Says he has information you're going to want to hear. Over."

"OK, put him on, but be on guard. Over."

"Don't worry. Over."

Kono gestured for Solo to go around to the passenger car door. "No tricks this time," Kono said.

"No tricks," Solo responded.

Solo opened the door and slid into the passenger seat. Kono spoke again into the receiver. "It's the American, Solo. I'm about to put him on."

Kono handed the receiver to Solo. "I assume you know how to work one of these," he said.

"Yes, thank you," Solo said as he took the receiver. "I understand you're acquainted with one Wo Fat. Is this correct? Over."

This time there was a long pause. Solo glanced into Kono's face. The big Hawaiian certainly recognized the name. Kono's face had tightened with the mention of Wo Fat.

"We've met. Let's continue this discussion elsewhere. Come to my office immediately. Over."

"We'll be there directly. Out," Solo said.

Fifteen minutes later, Solo's and Kono's cars pulled up to the Iolani Palace, Solo coming in first with Kono behind him. They walked up the stairs to the Five-O offices.

Kono ushered Solo straight to McGarrett's office. Inside, both McGarrett and Dan Williams were in their shirt sleeves, with no ties. McGarrett sat the desk while Williams stood nearby.

"This had better be good," McGarrett said.

Solo was right to the point. "Our man Partridge is a decoy. He's working for Wo Fat, apparently to draw attention away from him. Presumably, Partridge's arrival in the islands was the result of a disinformation effort. People would watch him and not be aware this Wo Fat was here."

"Just how do you know all this?" McGarrett said sharply.

"My associate, Mister Kuryakin, came across Partridge and followed him into a restaurant in Chinatown. He managed to get that information to me. He mentioned something else: the auction is tomorrow on a yacht which will be at sea."

"What do you know about Wo Fat?" McGarrett said.

"Just sketchy details. I contacted my home office. A duty officer gave me the highlights. Let's see. Former operative for the Peoples' Republic of China. Apparently an old Maoist, violently disagreed with his nation's policies. Went independent, even attempted a coup sometime back. Those were the basics. Also, he has attempted several operations in Hawaii, mostly unsuccessfully."

"Where's Kuryakin?" Williams said.

"Either captured or killed, most likely," Solo said. "He's made no attempt to contact me since getting the information about Wo Fat. He failed to show when I got to the restaurant."

McGarrett rose from his desk and started snapping his fingers, a nervous habit when he was trying to think. "Nothing specific, like a yacht name?" he said.

"Just that the yacht leaves at two tomorrow and the auction would occur an hour later."

Williams turned to McGarrett. "Steve, if Wo Fat gets his hands on that bacteria..."

"He uses it to take over China—and blames the United States in the process," McGarrett said. "And if Wo Fat's in the game, it doesn't matter who else is bidding. He'll tip the scales his way." McGarrett paused. "Mister Solo, I don't trust you very far and I'd rather have you where I can keep an eye on you. I'd like you to come with me. We're going to pay a visit to somebody. Danno, you come along, too. Kono, you keep an eye on things here."

McGarrett and Williams went over to a coat rack for their suit jackets and ties. McGarrett motioned for Solo to follow. The U.N.C.L.E. agent had no real choice at this point.

The three men left the office and down the steps to the main exit. As they approached the exterior steps, McGarrett turned to Williams. "Danno, wasn't Toptegan staying at the Royal Hawaiian?"

"That's right," Williams said.

"All right, Mister Solo, you get in the passenger seat. Danno, you watch him from the back," McGarrett said as they approached the Five-O leader's car.

"I haven't seen one of these in a long time," Solo said as he got into the passenger seat.

The Mercury's tires squealed as McGarrett pulled out of the parking lot. Less than a half hour later, they pulled into the parking lot of the Royal Hawaiian. As they pulled into a space, McGarrett said, "If I know Mischa, he's probably enjoying a full meal about now. Stay close, Mister Solo. No games this time."

Solo frowned but didn't comment.

A few minutes later, the three men were inside the Royal Hawaii's restaurant. Upon entering, McGarrett looked toward the back and saw Mischa eating some kind of fruit cocktail. A waitress offered to seat them, but McGarrett explained his group was meeting someone already seated.

Kuryakin's head hurt as he woke up. How many times had this happened over his career? He opened his eyes but his vision was a bit blurry. As his eyes came into focus, he saw Partridge sitting across from him holding a gun and another man who was standing. Heavy set, perhaps five-foot-nine or ten inches tall. He was dressed in a basic blue business suit. His head was shaven and he had a neat mustache. Apparently, his guess of Chinese was correct, Kuryakin thought, remembering the mystery voice.

"Good evening, Mister Kuryakin," the Chinese man said. "The U-N-C-L-E is more efficient that I thought. My name is Wo Fat. But I suspect you knew that already."

Kuryakin began to mentally take stock of his situation. He was tied up, of course, and up against a wall. Or was it a hull? He could feel a slight motion. And he appeared to be in a small bedroom of some sort. Of course! He was on a boat.

"I only know of you by reputation," Kuryakin answered. "Our dossiers go beyond our direct adversaries. I am sure, however, it is not complete."

"Ah, but Mister Partridge here has given me a rather detailed account of your adventures. Quite impressive. It's too bad you chose to involve yourself in my affairs."

"The choice was not really mine, you know," Kuryakin said.

"I must apologize for the accommodations, but after hearing from Mister Partridge I decided I had to make you secure, so to speak."

"I think we should perhaps consider killing the gentleman," Partridge interjected.

"Patience, my dear Emory," Wo Fat replied. "You will have your opportunity. For now, he provides potential bargaining power in the event of an emergency. And I would certainly like to know what he may have told his colleague. I assume Mister Solo is here, is he not?"

"I don't recall," Kuryakin said.

"Tut, tut, always being difficult," Wo Fat said. "We are not set up here for a thorough interrogation. But I know you did not have that much of an opportunity to get a message out. However, you might have gotten some information to Mister Solo. What was it?"

Kuryakin grimaced. He was in for a long night.

Mischa looked up as the three men approached. He instantly recognized McGarrett and assumed the blond man was his deputy, Dan Williams. The other man seemed familiar somehow as well, even though Mischa knew he had never met him in person.

"Forgive me for being rude, Colonel, but we need to talk to you and now is as good a time as any. May we?" McGarrett said, gesturing toward the table.

"Of course," Mischa said in his heavy Russian accent. "Old comrades should always enjoy a meal together."

Mischa had been seated at a table for four even though he was by himself. Solo, McGarrett and Williams sat down, McGarrett across from Mischa and Williams next to the Russian.

"Colonel, this is Mister Solo from the U-N-C-L-E," McGarrett said, pointing to Solo.

"Yes, I seem to recall you mentioning something about the gentleman. Mister Solo, are you here by yourself or is your colleague, Mister Kuryakin, nearby?

"Mister Kuryakin is off in parts unknown at the moment," Solo said.

"That's too bad," Mischa said. Turning his head toward McGarrett, he added: "What does this have to do with me, Stephen?"

"Mister Kuryakin picked up some information this afternoon," McGarrett said. "The auction for the Q strain may not be what you think it is, Mischa."

"And how is that?"

Solo answered. "It appears that one of the bidders isn't a bidder. One Mister G. Emory Partridge, whom everyone assumed to be involved, is really a decoy. He's in the employ of one Mister Wo Fat."

Mischa grimaced for a moment, then he resumed smiling as quickly as he could. "That's impossible. Wo Fat is nowhere near Hawaii."

"Undoubtedly a smokescreen," McGarrett said. "With Wo Fat involved, there's no auction. He'll take the Q strain and whatever money he can. Mister Kuryakin had another piece of information."

Solo began talking as if on cue. "It seems the auction is to take place at sea, on a yacht. Around three tomorrow afternoon. Anyone attending would be rather, uh, isolated if something should go wrong."

McGarrett resumed. "My guess is Rollo Ingstein thinks he's running the show tomorrow. But I wouldn't be surprised if Wo Fat had manipulated him into selecting a specific boat. Ingstein might think it's all his idea. But Wo Fat is the one pulling the strings. Face it, Mischa, you haven't a chance of securing that bacteria. You'll only be adding to Wo Fat's haul. By this time tomorrow, you'll be dead."

"Why should I believe you?" Mischa said.

"Don't, then," McGarrett said. "But can you take a chance on a China ruled by Wo Fat? And with the Q strain under his control?"

"Suddenly, I am not so hungry," Mischa said. "What is it you want?"

"The boat. The specific harbor," McGarrett said.

The beating wasn't the worst Kuryakin had endured. The tall Chinese man Wo Fat had brought in was fairly efficient and obviously knew how to do his job. Kuryakin concluded there were no broken bones but some ugly bruises that would last a few days—if he lived that long.

"That will be enough, Chow Lee," Wo Fat said. With that, the tall Chinese walked out of the compartment.

Kuryakin let out a groan. Wo Fat continued. "In the end, I suppose it matters little. If I had the proper supplies I could get the truth out of you with drugs. But for this affair, I had to travel light."

"Wo Fat, could you indulge me just a little?" Kuryakin said.

"Of course. Never let it be said I was not a proper host."

"I was under the naive impression that Rollo Ingstein, the researcher who stole the Q strain was behind all this."

"Oh he is, up to a point. It was his idea to develop the new version of the bacteria. But he is an amateur. He began making inquiries within the international underworld for men he could employ and so on. He retained the services of a certain gentleman here in Honolulu to set up the meeting place and so forth. What he does not know is that this same man also performs the occasional favors for myself. Through this individual, I was able to suggest this yacht at this time. My man also assisted in getting out the word to potential bidders. It had to look to Mister Ingstein as if a true auction was going to occur. So we will have three individuals here tomorrow who each—mistakenly—believes he or she has a chance to win the Q strain. They will be eliminated but their funds will be useful."

"I suppose Ingstein will be eliminated, also." Kuryakin said.

"Not right away," Wo Fat replied. "He may prove useful, even after he learns the truth."

"May I ask who the unlucky bidders are?"

"So inquisitive, Mister Kuryakin. You know the information will do you no good."

"Indulge me anyway."

"One of them is one of your countrymen, one Colonel Toptegan of the KGB, or whatever that agency calls itself these days. He and I have had dealings before. The second is a representative of a particularly sophisticated La Cosa Nostra—what do the Americans call them? ah yes—family. Finally, the third person is a member of a group you are familiar with. Thrush, I believe is the name. The group's representative is a woman, Contessa Valerie D'Emparssario."

Kuryakin's face wrinkled. That wasn't a name with which he was familiar. "Sorry, I'm not aware of that name."

"Oh, really?" Wo Fat said. "She may bear special attention, then."

Kuryakin quickly changed the subject. "And good old Mister Partridge is your decoy."

"Yes, and he has been splendid. He has been under observation by a number of agencies.

I thought we had successfully smuggled him out of his hotel today but your presence obviously proved otherwise."

Kuryakin was tempted to smile. He chose not to tell Wo Fat that it was a chance encounter.

Wo Fat turned to a table behind him. He picked up a syringe loaded with a clear fluid. "As for you, you are insurance in case something goes wrong tomorrow. But I doubt it will. You won't be able to count on living much past the transaction, I'm afraid."

Wo Fat reached down and found a vein in Kuryakin's arm. He jabbed the Russian with the needle and pressed the plunger. Kuryakin felt himself falling asleep almost immediately.

The telephone rang at McGarrett's desk in his Iolani Palace office. "I think we're ready now, sir," a man's voice said at the other end.

"Thank you. I'm putting it on the speaker now," McGarrett said.

McGarrett punched a button on his telephone set.

"Jonathan Kaye here," the U.S. official said from his office in Washington, where he had returned almost immediately after arriving in Hawaii.

"Alexander Waverly here." Napoleon Solo recognized the voice of his superior at U.N.C.L.E.

"Gentlemen, the United States government and the U-N-C-L-E have decided to enter an admittedly uneasy alliance and cooperate on this matter," Kaye began. "Normally, on matters of national security, we're uncomfortable with a multi-national effort. Still, with the new information Mister Solo has provided, we've decided to join forces. It is absolutely imperative the Q strain not fall into the hands of Wo Fat. If that means the bacteria is destroyed on the spot, so be it. Under no circumstances can we let that happen. Our analysis shows that the bacteria would be replicated and used almost immediately, perhaps in another coup attempt by Wo Fat. Mister Waverly...?"

"Thank you," Waverly said. "I'm assigning Mister Solo to work with Mister McGarrett. If you two gentlemen can handle it, we'll avoid specific responsibilities at this point. Our primary interest is making sure that bacteria doesn't fall into Wo Fat's hands. Or, for that matter, any of the other bidders. I understand one of them is cooperating."

"That is correct, sir," Solo said to Waverly. "We can count on Colonel Toptegan's assistance."

"The U.S. Coast Guard and Navy will also work with Mister McGarrett," Kaye said. "They will patrol as close as they can but the ocean is a big place."

"Gentlemen, because of the time zone differences, it is essentially up to you to devise the operational plan," Waverly said. "We'll leave you to it. Good luck."

The line went dead. McGarrett stood up, again in shirt sleeves and without a tie. "Suggestions, Mister Solo?"

"How well would Wo Fat's men know Colonel Toptegan?"

"Wo Fat and Mischa have had face-to-face meetings in the past," McGarrett said.

"Not Wo Fat," Solo said. "His operatives."

"Hard to say. Since going independent, he tends to hire underlings on a job-by-job basis, although he has one assassin who has worked with him for years. What are you getting at?"

"Well, it would take a fake mustache and padded clothing, but if I could pass for the colonel long enough to get on the boat, we might have a chance. Wo Fat isn't going to show himself right away. I don't have to fool anyone long. Just long enough to get on the boat."

"What then?"

"If I can get to the same room with the sample, I can incinerate it."

"That's a huge risk. Enormous."

"If you thought Mister Williams, Mister Kelly or Mister Kalakaua were on that boat, would you consider a similar plan? Almost certainly Wo Fat's men would recognize any member of Hawaii Five-O. But they might not recognize me—at least not right away."

McGarrett sighed. For once, he didn't argue.

At one fifty-five, a cab stopped outside the Freeman Marina. A man in a baggy white suit, large white hat, white shoes and a black tie emerged. The sunglasses he wore obscured his eyes.

"How much?" the man said in a Russian accent.

"Twelve-fifty," said the cabby, a man of Asian descent.

"Keep it," the man said, handing back a twenty-dollar bill.

As the cab drove off, Napoleon Solo walked toward the marina. He was carrying a brown attachñ case. Inside were counterfeit duplicates of the bearer bonds the bidders had been instructed to carry. The counterfeits wouldn't stand up under a lot of scrutiny but Solo reasoned the affair would be decided long before that point.

Solo kept walking until he found what he was looking for: a sixty-five-foot yacht, the Stevens. A Chinese man dressed in casual pants and a brightly colored Hawaii shirt, stood at the gangplank. But the man hardly looked casual.

"I am expected," Solo said, again using the bogus Russian accent.

Solo came aboard, acting as if the boat were his. Another Asian man was on deck. "You are Toptegan?"

"Of course."

"If you don't mind sir, I have to inspect you. Part of the rules, so to speak."

Solo opened the white jacket coat, showing he had no firearm. He pulled up both pant legs. "As you can see, no weapons."

"And the pockets?" the Asian man asked.

Solo emptied the pants pockets and pulled out the pockets themselves for effect. "A wallet, a pen and keys. Satisfied?"

"Go on below."

Solo found the way below and walked past a couple of compartments until he reached the forward cabin. Drapes covered a large window. In the cabin, three people were waiting for him. He recognized Rollo Ingstein from his dossier photos but the others were new faces.

"Colonel Toptegan, glad you could make it. You were pressing the deadline," Ingstein said. The microbiologist picked up a phone attached to a wall. "We can shove off now," Ingstein said.

Solo heard the yacht's engine roar to life and commotion up on deck. "And this, I take it, is the competition?" Solo said.

"Quite," Ingstein replied. He pointed toward a tall, thin brunette woman in a white sleeveless dress. "This is the Countess Valerie D'Emparssario, she represents an independent organization known as Thrush."

Solo's mind raced. The name meant nothing. It was in no Thrush dossier he had ever seen. Undoubtedly an alias. The bigger worry: would she identify Solo as an U.N.C.L.E. agent? Already her green eyes seemed to be examining Solo. But she was playing it cool. "Charmed, I'm sure," she said in what sounded like a French accent. There was no guarantee that was genuine, either.

"This gentleman is Anthony Montori, from a firm in the United States," Ingstein said.

Obviously a Mafioso, Solo thought. He had a full head of jet black hair. Though it was only early afternoon, he already looked like he could use a shave. Montori stood silently.

"We'll cruise a little bit and then conduct our business," Ingstein said.

Solo looked around for a seat and sat down. The others did the same. Solo could feel the gaze of the two bidders. He then glanced at his watch. It wasn't his normal model. Instead, it was gold-plated. Also on the left wrist was a gold chain with several gold charms in the shape of quarter moons.

The ride seemed like an eternity. The yacht moved slowly at first as it cleared the harbor, then picked up speed. Solo figured this was going to be the longest boat ride of his life.

A few miles away, two helicopters sat in a field overlooking the marina. Steve McGarrett held a machine gun and leaned up against one helicopter. With his right hand, he held a walkie-talkie. "Subject craft now leaving the harbor. Over," a plainclothes policeman said over the walkie-talkie.

"Roger, unit three. What is their direction? Over," McGarrett said.

"Southwest, getting up toward twenty knots. I will be losing sight of her in the next few minutes. Over."

"Good job, Mike. We'll take it from here. Over and out," McGarrett replied.

Dan Williams walked over from the other helicopter. "Coast Guard knows what to look for. They've spread out several craft approximately where a yacht that size could reach in an hour," Williams said.

"Let's give it ten minutes and then get in the air," McGarrett said. "But let's not crowd him."

It had been fifty-nine minutes since the yacht left the harbor. Solo was feeling butterflies in his stomach. The trip so far had been almost completely silent. It was eerie. Solo bit his lip.

Ingstein brought out a case from behind his chair and stood up. "I'd say we can begin now," he said. "What I am about to show you is one of the deadliest substances in the world." He opened the case and withdrew a metal tube. He unscrewed one end and withdrew a small vial capped with a cork. "I mixed this up shortly before we left. This, lady and gentlemen, is the Q strain. This new improved variety lasts twelve hours in sunlight. If I were to break this vial in a populated area, everyone would die well before the twelve hours ended."

"How do we know this is genuine?" Montori said in a sharp tone.

"The winner today will be supplied with various supporting documents I have on board," Ingstein said. "I am quite familiar with the reputation of all your organizations. It would be extremely foolhardy of me to attempt to fool you. I want to enjoy my money."

"Before we continue, there's something you should know," Countess D'Emparssario interjected. "This man," she said, pointing At Solo, "is not with the KGB. He is an U.N.C.L.E. agent."

"What are you talking about?" Solo said, maintaining his Russian accent.

"I've met this man before. He has either gained weight or his suit is padded," she said.

"I've never seen you before in my life!" Solo protested.

"There you're wrong, Mister Solo. I realize you don't remember me. On our last encounter, I was known as Madame Alceste Streigau. But I am also known as Doctor Egret," she said.

Solo's mind raced. Doctor Egret, a female Thrush operative known for her ability to disguise herself, changing radically with each appearance. Solo had met Doctor Egret only once in person, but Doctor Egret had also been the brains behind an attempt to destroy U.N.C.L.E. headquarters during a conference of world leaders there.

Solo's eyes focused on Ingstein. He still hadn't replaced the vial in the metal container. It was now or never. Solo grabbed one of the quarter moons off the gold chain on his wrist and threw it at Ingstein's feet. A burst of flame shot up from the spot. There was a cry of agony as Ingstein was engulfed in fire.

The Mafia chieftain glanced at the burning biochemist . That was all the opening Solo needed. He delivered a karate blow at Montori's neck. The man was out instantly and fell to the deck. But before Solo could move, Doctor Egret was all over him, clawing at him. He used a quick judo maneuver, throwing her to the floor. He clipped her temple with his right hand, knocking her unconscious.

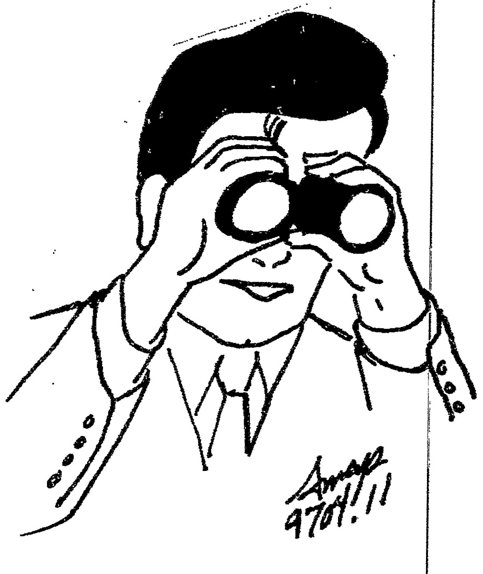
"Sorry, Countess. Getting less chivalrous in my old age."

Ingstein's screaming had stopped. His body was badly charred. But now there was a new threat. Half of the front cabin was now on fire.

Wo Fat and Chow Lee sate in a rear cabin watching over the sleeping Kuryakin. Wo Fat glanced at his watch. "Ingstein should be starting now. Let's give him fifteen minutes. I'll signal the men on deck. You and they will go in and shoot everyone except Ingstein. We must act quickly. He is to show them the vial and then replace it in a metal container. We must wait until that is done before we attack."

Wo Fat sat back in a chair while Chow Lee stood watching Kuryakin. Suddenly, there was a roar from the front of the yacht.

Dan Williams was keeping watch on the Stevens from one of the helicopters, observing the yacht with a pair of binoculars. But it was hard to keep a good view because of the helicopter's movements.



Then he saw what appeared to be a flash. He blinked his eyes a couple of times and took another look. There was a plume of smoke.

Williams turned to the pilot and gestured to get closer. "Copter two to copter one," Williams said into the radio. "The Stevens is on fire. Repeat, the Stevens is on fire. Over."

"Read you and confirm, copter two. Let's move in," McGarrett replied over the radio.

Kuryakin had been awake for several minutes before the explosion but didn't want to tip off his captors. They had laid him down on a bunk. Despite being bound, he figured he had to make a move now. Wo Fat was the closest man, so Kuryakin took his two bound hands and struck the Chinese man in the face. It was difficult to use much leverage but Wo Fat had been caught by surprise. Kuryakin got in one more quick blow; Wo Fat seemed dazed.

Chow Lee, the tall Chinese, now was reaching for his gun. Kuryakin somehow lurched himself head first into the tall man's midsection. He could feel Chow Lee lose his breath but the man was still conscious and already attempting to strike Kuryakin again.

Just then, Kuryakin saw a sight that was both slightly ridiculous and glorious. Napoleon Solo, in a big white suit and hat, crashed into the cabin, leaned over and struck a karate blow to Chow Lee's neck. Just for good measure, he delivered another, although the man was already unconscious.

Solo helped up Kuryakin and quickly undid his bonds. "I think you should consider going back to your old tailor," Kuryakin said weakly. The beating he'd received had taken more out of him than he had guessed.

Solo peeled off the fake mustache. "It's what I get for trying a discount store. I was hoping I'd find you in one of these cabins."

From outside, they could hear helicopters buzzing by. "Put down your weapons!" It was McGarrett's voice.

Solo got Kuryakin's attention. He pointed to himself, then pointed up. They stepped over the unconscious Wo Fat and Chow Lee and exited the cabin. They glanced back to see the cabin starting to catch fire. They had no time to waste.

There was no one in the stairs to the upper deck. Solo poked his head out. There was no one at the helm. The crew of Asians were all on deck, engaged in a fire fight with two helicopters. The men on deck and the men in the helicopters were firing machine guns at one another. Solo took off two more quarter moons from the gold chain and hurled them up into the air and onto the deck where they exploded into flame. At least one of the Asians was now on fire as well. Solo quickly tore off the remaining quarter moons and threw them too.

"Let's go!" Kuryakin yelled from down below. "Or we'll be well done."

"Any sign of survivors?" Solo asked as Kuryakin got up.

"Can't tell. I take it you incinerated the Q strain," Kuryakin said.

"If I didn't, that is one tough bacteria."

The two men dived over the side and began to swim. There were scattered gunshots now as one or two crew members insisted on carrying on with the fight. They swam for another minute, then dived below the surface. They were perhaps three or four feet under the water when they felt the impact of the explosion.

Solo stretched out in his hospital bed. He was still a bit dizzy from the concussion but he had suffered no broken bones. In the bed next to his, Kuryakin was still napping. He had required more bandages primarily because of the beating he had received at the hands of Wo Fat's lackey.

There was a knock at the door. "It's Alexander Waverly," the voice said from the other side.

"Please enter, sir," Solo said.

Waverly registered surprise when he saw Kuryakin was still asleep. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's all right, sir," Solo said. "Illya needs the rest more. I'm sure we can talk softly enough not to wake him."

Waverly sat down in a chair between the two beds. Despite the warmth of the Hawaiian climate, he was wearing one of his usual tweed suits. "And how are you getting along, Mister Solo?"

"Still, a little dizzy. I have to admit I don't remember much beyond the explosion on the Stevens."

"Not that much to tell. The men from Five-O were in helicopters that had rescue equipment. They helped fish you out. A specially-equipped ship from the Coast Guard managed to prevent that flaming hull from going down."

"Did we destroy the Q strain, sir?"

"Absolutely," Waverly said. "Believe me, if you hadn't you wouldn't be here now. No, that incendiary device did the job."

"What about those on board? I have to admit those things were a little more powerful than I thought, sir."

"We found a few bodies of crewmen. Also, the Mafia man. Unfortunately, there seemed to be no sign of either that Wo Fat fellow or Doctor Egret. And, to add to our troubles, Emory Partridge managed to slip away. He had made his appearance in Honolulu with the intent of distracting the authorities. But when everyone heard about the explosions, surveillance became a little lax."

"Wonderful," Solo said, sounding discouraged.

"Quite all right, Mister Solo. You succeeded with the primary objective. We went through what was left of Ingstein's things. If there are any records of his work developing the new Q strain, they won't be easy to find."

"One more thing, sir. Just how did you encourage Jonathan Kaye to see things your way? I was under the impression he was insistent the U.S. people try to recover the Q strain."

"Oh, Mister Kaye is not an unreasonable man, Mister Solo," Waverly said. "I think I helped him to realize that it might not be the best public relations if it somehow Wo Fat seized the bacteria out from under the nose of the U.S. I think he came to see that it would be much easier to try to destroy the bacteria than try to retrieve it. After all, it was not an officially authorized project. There would be quite a bit of explaining to do."

Solo nodded and smiled. "Yes sir."

Waverly got up. "I must be off. I understand you both will only be here in the hospital another day. I suggest you stay in Honolulu another week afterwards. I'd say you've earned it."

"Thank you, sir."

Waverly turned around and left the room. Solo realized after all the years he had worked for Waverly, he never could predict his superior's mood.

An hour later, when Kuryakin was awake, the U.N.C.L.E. agents had two more visitors: Steve McGarrett and Kono Kalakaua from Hawaii Five-O.

"My superior tells me that your old adversary wasn't found," Solo said. "I'm sorry about that."

"Unfortunately, Wo Fat makes a habit of pulling off miracle escapes," McGarrett said. "Still, this has to rank as a substantial setback. I doubt he'll be back soon."

"Boss, the flowers," Kono said.

"Go ahead, Kono," McGarrett said.

Kono left the room. When he returned a moment later, he was holding a pot with flowers. He stood and extended the flowers as if he were giving them to Kuryakin.

"Uh, thank you," the Russian said.

Solo had spotted the one fake in the bunch but it was too late. The plastic flower in the midst of the real flowers squirted water in Kuryakin's face. Kono's large hands obscured a container and tube.

The normally stone-faced McGarrett grinned and Kono broke into a big smile. "Had to get you back for that watch trick," Kono said.

Kuryakin fumed. "Beaten, drowned and now humiliated," he said. "I have never been a big fan of the American sense of humor." He turned toward Solo. "And the watch was your idea, after all."

"I think I'll let you gentlemen resolve this dispute amongst yourselves," McGarrett said. "You did pretty good work out there. I have to admit I was a bit nervous. Come back, anytime, but preferably not on business." He shook Solo's hand immediately. Kuryakin hesitated but went ahead and shook anyway.

McGarrett and Kono left but McGarrett paused. "Aloha," he said and then closed the door.

Solo looked at Kuryakin. "You have to admit, he really did surprise you."

Kuryakin threw his pillow in Solo's face. "Next time, I'll get a private room."

Author's note: This story is dedicated to the memory of Morton Stevens, who brought both The Man From U.N.C.L.E. and Hawaii Five-O alive with his music. WJK, Indianapolis, 2/7/97

MAGNETIC

Amanda le Bas de Plumetôt

The morning had been filled with edgy anticipation. She'd yelled at the kids, rousing her daughter out of bed, hassling her son to tend to his morning chores, then hustled them into the car. She fondly kissed her husband goodbye. He dropped the kids at school on his way to work. Throughout the morning's rush, though, as she loaded laundry into the washing machine and fixed school lunches and held her husband for a moment as she kissed him, her thoughts had been dominated by a small blonde man.

It was a relief to get them all out of the house. To switch on the computer and get into the word processor. To write about the little blonde man. She'd dreamt about him the night before, dreamt a mismatched series of images that had resolved the story for her so that she could write it and send it to the fanzine editor. Her husband smiled and shook his head at her quirk. He didn't mind if she wrote Man from U.N.C.L.E. fiction. It kept her happy, and he liked it when she was happy. He had no idea how often he shared his bed with Illya Kuryakin. She smiled; after all, it wasn't really as if she was betraying him in any way. It didn't do any harm and it didn't bother anybody. She looked at the pictures tacked up around her desk. David McCallum was as old as her mother. What possible harm could there be in this silly infatuation?

She had dressed all in black. It put her in the right mood...the black turtleneck, the black stirrup pants, the black sneakers. She'd resisted the temptation to put on the balaclava, but she kept it handy. She felt like a spy. Hell, she even felt thinner. She brought a cup of tea to the desk and turned on the computer. Illya Kuryakin's voice said "Open Channel D". While the word processor got itself organized she put the radio on; it played quietly. Crowded House came on, a song she loved. *Hey now, hey now, don't dream it's over...* The song seemed just right for her today. She'd figured a way to bring Napoleon and Illya into the nineties.

She wrote in a kind of haze. At some stage the washing machine had finished its cycle and she kept reminding herself that she must get the washing out and hang it to dry. Trouble was, she kept thinking to do that right in the middle of an interesting scene. "I'll do it at the end of the paragraph," she kept telling herself, and when that paragraph ended, there was another one to write. Worse than that, the radio seemed to be playing all Sixties songs that morning. The Monkees did *Tapioca Tundra*, the Cowsills sang *The Rain, the Park and Other Things,* the Beatles did *Blackbird*. She listened to the original version of *Itchikoo Park.* The songs were all her old favorites. She kept meaning to listen to the chatter between songs, see if that station did a regular Sixties morning. There never seemed to be any talk between the songs, though. She assumed it was all getting lost in her typing.

She ran the spell checker and did another save. She checked back over what she had written. Eight pages. Eight pages of solid typing, and her tea, untouched, was stone cold. She didn't remember a time when she'd ever written this much this quickly. She needed to get up, stretch her legs, take a break. She needed hot tea and something to eat. It had to be lunchtime by now. The kitchen clock had stopped not long after nine. It was an odd thing to happen, she thought; if electronic clocks stopped then the LEDs died, but these were still lit, just at the wrong time. She had no idea what the real time was. She made toast and went back to the study, eating it. She forgot to look at the time on the study clock.

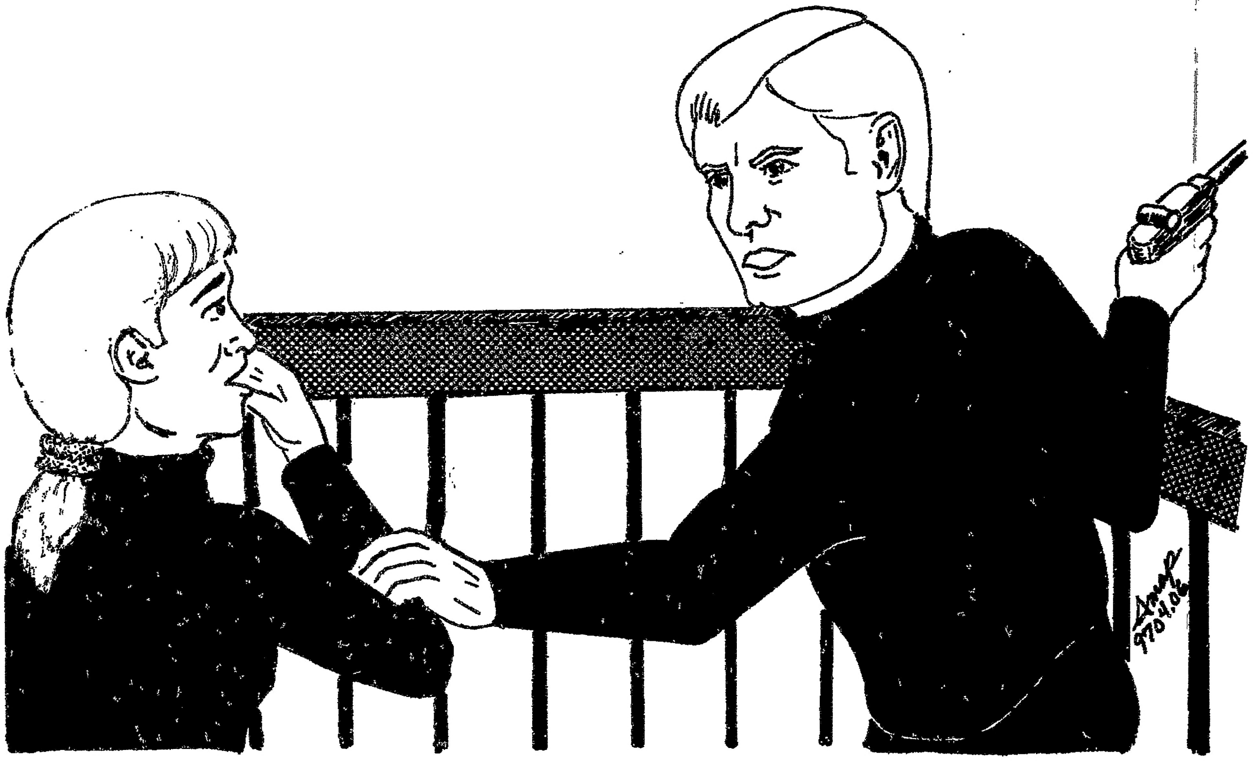
The story was almost finished. She couldn't believe it. In her most avid writing fevers she'd been able to complete stories in two or three days, but never before in the span of time it took from when the children went to school until their return home. She wondered what the time was. In the distance there was the drawn-out hoot of the little tourist steam train that ran twice a day on weekdays. She smiled; it had to be the three-forty Puffing Billy. The kids would be on their way home now, wandering along the unmade road to home. She felt slightly guilty about the lack of housework that she had done. Still, she could catch up on it now, and she made a promise not to nag at the kids. After all, she'd had a really good day.

It was odd the way Puffing Billy was blowing his whistle, though. Usually he only gave a brief blast as he passed the level crossing near the school. This hoot seemed to be going on and on. Perhaps there was a goat or something on the track. Her attention focused on the sound the little train was making now. It was just odd. Surely he would run out of steam or something, hooting for this long time. Then he stopped, and the way he stopped was just as odd as the hooting had been. There was no tailing off, no echo of sound about the hills. Nothing. Just silence. It was like the sound itself had been reversed in the middle of its occurrence, so that it was unnatural, lacking the normal decay of a dying sound, ending on its own attack.

She told herself it was her imagination. She'd become so deeply involved with what she was writing that her ears had gone funny. Or something. It sounded pretty lame, only now she could hear somebody moving about on her bedroom balcony. She told herself it had to be rosellas, come down to see if she had remembered to put seed out for them. They had to be really big rosellas though, to make that much noise.

She went quietly, nervously, to her bedroom and reached the balcony door in time to see a man throw himself onto the verandah.

"Get down!" he said urgently. There wasn't time to shut the door or do anything, so she threw herself backward. She heard a booming noise crack about the hills and saw the man collapse. She hadn't seen his face, but the way his blonde hair had fanned around his head when he'd flopped down onto the verandah had made her stomach lurch into a series of flopping somersaults. He wasn't unconscious. Despite the smudges of blood he was now leaving on the verandah, he had rolled through his fall into a sitting position, and somehow in the same action pulled a gun from



somewhere.

He fired off two shots, making her feel dizzy and ill with the roaring percussion of sound and the smell of gunpowder that filled the room. He grunted in pain, drawing himself back against the wall of the house and scanning the yard beneath. She saw his profile and stepped forward, her mouth opening in disbelief. The movement distracted him. "Get back!" he told her. The second shot knocked him flat and this time he didn't get up.

There was no time for disbelief. She saw a shadow duck behind one of the big gum trees. She grabbed the man by his wrists and dragged him into her room. He made a gagging, pained sound. One of the bullets had damaged his right shoulder and being dragged like this hurt him. He hadn't let go of the gun, though.

She got him inside, onto the mat and closed the door. She gazed at his face, wanting to reassure him but unable to speak. Frightened, not because he was a dangerous stranger, but because she knew who he was. She'd known when she saw him in profile. Hell, she had known who he was the minute she saw the way he moved. She knew who he was when her insides turned themselves upside down at the sight of his distress. She tried to think of something to say to him, but choked on her own disbelief, and was then relieved of the necessity to speak at all as she saw his eyes glaze out of consciousness.

All she could think to do was put her disbelief to one side and use her small knowledge of first aid on him. She needed to roll him into a coma position. She pushed him onto his left side, then pulled him over so that he was partly supported by his injured right arm. She braced him with his right leg, bending it out in front of him so he was stable. There was blood smearing the floor, forming puddles about him. The first shot had hit him in his right thigh. The smell of blood and gunsmoke filled the room and made her feel queasy. She ran to the bathroom for the first-aid kit.

She reached into the cupboard for the kit, then stared in dismay at her hands. They were caked with blood. It coated her broken cuticle and the myriad of little cuts she'd given herself in the garden on the weekend. She hoped Illya Kuryakin had clean Sixties blood, virgin of HIV and hepatitis. She wiped the worst of the blood off on her pants, grabbed the first-aid kit and went back to Illya.

She pressed a rolled bandage against the bleeding right thigh and bound it tightly with gauze. He looked silly with the white bandage over the top of his black pants. She wondered if it would have been better if she'd taken his pants off. The thought seemed naughty though, and she told herself that the important thing was to stop the bleeding as quickly as possible. She pulled his right arm out of the sleeve of his jacket. The black rollneck he was wearing was torn and burned where the bullet had passed through from back to front, ripping his shoulder and, she thought, breaking his clavicle. She wondered for a moment what to do about his gun holster, then decided to simply ignore it and pushed pads of bandage onto the front and back of the wound, wished for a third hand, and bound the whole thing together in a clumsy crisscross of gauze that would have earned her a dismayed headshake from her first-aid teacher. She was sure the whole thing would fall apart the moment the man moved. The moment Illya Kuryakin woke up.

She sat back and stared at him for a moment. It was silly. Of course he wasn't Illya Kuryakin. Aside from being thirty years too young there was the small matter of Illya being fictitious. Without seeing his face she was almost able to believe that about the man. Able to tell herself that he was an injured man...god knew who, and possibly quite dangerous. Normal blokes, after all, didn't go round climbing the twenty feet up to her bedroom balcony and then getting themselves shot. Nevertheless, she had done her best for him, and what she needed now was to call an ambulance for him. And the police, too. They needed to be here. Whoever had shot him was certainly more dangerous than he was. Her breath suddenly caught in her throat as she thought of her children coming home from school. Whoever had shot Illya...the man...might grab her children, offer them in exchange for the man they'd been hunting.

She looked at the bedroom clock. It was only ten past two. Odd. She was sure that was the three-forty Puffing Billy she'd heard. She reached for the phone on the bedroom wall, leaving smudges of blood on the wall and on the phone's buttons. Though she dialed the emergency number, nothing happened. She frowned. There was a dial tone, then little coded beeping noises that phones make to each other...then dial tone again. No ringing. She tried triple-zero again with the same results. She tried her husband's number at work and the same thing happened. In desperation she punched in a random selection of numbers, but there was only a dial tone each time.

She gazed hopelessly at the man. Though he was slight of stature he was still bigger than her and she knew she wouldn't be able to carry him out to the car. None of her neighbors would be home; they all worked. She needed help but she couldn't leave him.

Someone was knocking on the door. For a moment she feared that the shooters were out there, but surely people who tried to kill others with guns didn't bother to knock. Especially when the door wasn't even locked. She flung the door open and for a moment felt as though she was bathed in a vivid blue light. There was a radiant-looking woman standing before her, and a second figure behind the woman. She didn't look that far though, bound as she was, for a moment, in the calming blue aura of the woman. *A vision of the Madonna?* she wondered stupidly.

"Do you have a mobile phone?" she blurted, immediately trusting the blue woman, "There's a man and he's hurt and there's something wrong with my phone so I can't call for help."

"It's all right," the woman soothed, smiling, "You're Amanda Jeanne le Bas de Plumetot, aren't you?"

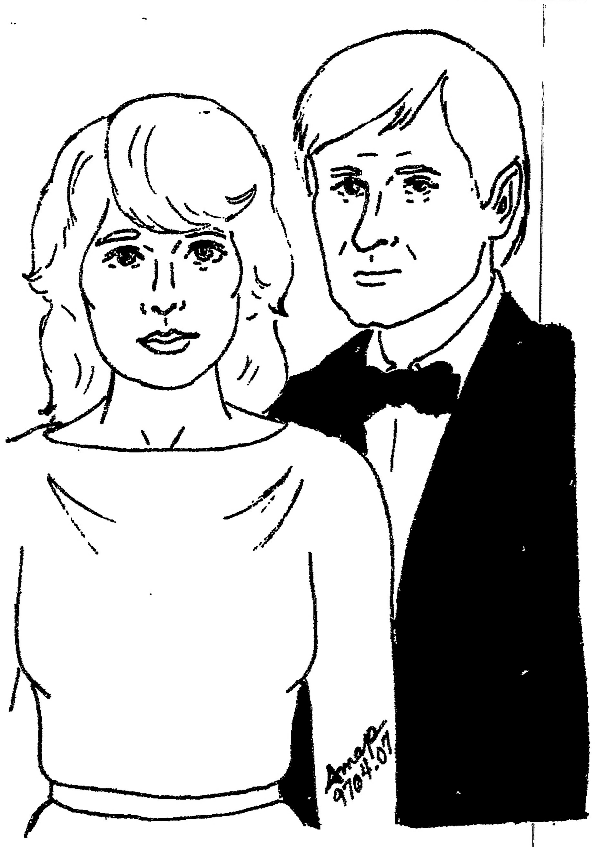
"Of course I am."

The woman nodded, "We've come to help you."

The woman stepped through the door and the second figure followed her, a dark, massive presence. Amanda stepped back to let them in. She looked up at the second figure. Despite the impression of mass that he brought with him, he was not a tall man, but small and compactly built. She looked at his face and felt reality ebb and flow about her as mutable as sand. He looked at her with cold interest out of David McCallum's face. Not Illya; he was a few years on from Illya, but unmistakably the same man. She wasn't feeling anything now. Her whole body had gone numb and she heard a hissing noise start around her head that she was sure meant she was about to faint.

Somebody caught her before she hit the floor. She knew it was him. She could feel the rough scratch of his suit on her face. He wasn't warm like Illya had been, though. His fingers dug into her armpit like metal bands. For a moment it seemed as if he were some kind of automaton. She felt the cool press of his body through his suit, smelled something like the cold breath of an abandoned forge. He pushed her gently into a lounge-room chair.

"Who are you?" she asked.



"My name is Sapphire and this is Steel," the woman said, indicating the man. As if she couldn't have guessed that he was Steel. Her muddied thoughts pondered their names as they spoke.

"Is it hers?" the man said, indicating the blood on her hands.

"No. It's come from outside. I'm afraid we're here too late. There's already been a breakthrough."

"Hmmm. She's very distressed."

"It's probably the blood. They do tend to find injury to their own kind very upsetting."

"I know that. Anyway, she didn't..." he waved his hand vaguely at the slumped woman, "...fall down like that till we came in."

"She's probably just relieved to have some help."

"Well, you help her. Give her water. I'm going to look about."

Sapphire found a glass and filled it with water. When she brought it back to Amanda, the woman seemed much more aware. She took the water and sipped it and stared at the blood drying on her hands. "There's a man in the other room," she said. "He needs medical help. He should be in hospital." She frowned. "You said you'd come to help. Are you from U.N.C.L.E.?"

Sapphire frowned. "I thought "uncle" was a male relative," she said.

"No, I mean...you're not spies, then."

Sapphire shook her head as though she wasn't exactly sure what a spy might be, but was fairly certain she wasn't one. "There is a problem with time," she explained, "Anachronisms that have broken through. We need to find the source of the damage. We need to make repairs."

"We need to help that man as well," said Amanda, "He's very badly hurt. He could..."

She faded into awe-stricken silence and stared at Steel as he returned to the room. "There is a damaged man in the bedroom," he said. He pointed at Amanda, "And I think she is a problem."

Sapphire didn't miss the expression of shock and pain on the other woman's face. She had noticed the way Amanda had clung to Steel when he'd caught her in her faint as well. Now the woman was blinking back tears, unsure about exactly what it was that Steel was blaming her for, but very sorry nevertheless.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"You know my name. "Her voice came barely above a whisper. "You said it...Sapphire said it when you came in."

"There's some sort of convention in this society," Steel snapped, "A child takes the name of its father's family. Women marry and then take the name of their husband's family. You have done neither. What is your name?"

"My birth certificate says Amanda Joan le Bas, but I've changed it. I like Jeanne better. It's sort of...Frencher." She tried to smile at him but it was lost in the unresponsive cool of his gaze. "And I like le Bas de Plumetot better than plain old le Bas. Nobody could spell or pronounce le Bas properly, so I thought I might as well give them a name that was worthwhile getting wrong. Anyway, le Bas de Plumetot is sort of my father's name. It comes from his family...they just dropped the de Plumetot a few generations ago when they came out to Australia."

Steel nodded, "An anachronism," he snapped.

Sapphire watched a wave of emotion wash over the other woman's face again. Things were difficult, but without the other woman's help they would be impossible. *Go easy on her,* she thought, directing the unspoken words at her partner. Steel caught the thought and looked at her, slightly questioning, oblivious of the effect his abrupt manner was having on Amanda.

"How is the man?" asked Sapphire.

Steel shrugged. "He's lying on the floor in there." He gestured vaguely in the direction of the bedroom. It seemed like an odd arrangement to him, but he wasn't going to question it.

"Perhaps we can help him," suggested Sapphire.

Amanda got up from her chair and led the way through to the bedroom. She was relieved to have the pressure off. It was very uncomfortable being questioned by Steel. He had a way of making her feel as if even something as simple as her own name was some sort of crime.

Illya was still lying on the floor. He hadn't moved. The blood around him was beginning to dry in ugly black sheets. There was the smell of a charnel house about the room and Illya was appallingly still. Amanda knelt on the floor beside him, rested her fingers on his neck, feeling for the carotid pulse that to her relief surged warmly beneath the press of her hand. She fell to temptation, letting her fingers slide through his hair, ruffling it slightly. Sapphire saw the smile of relief. "He's alive."

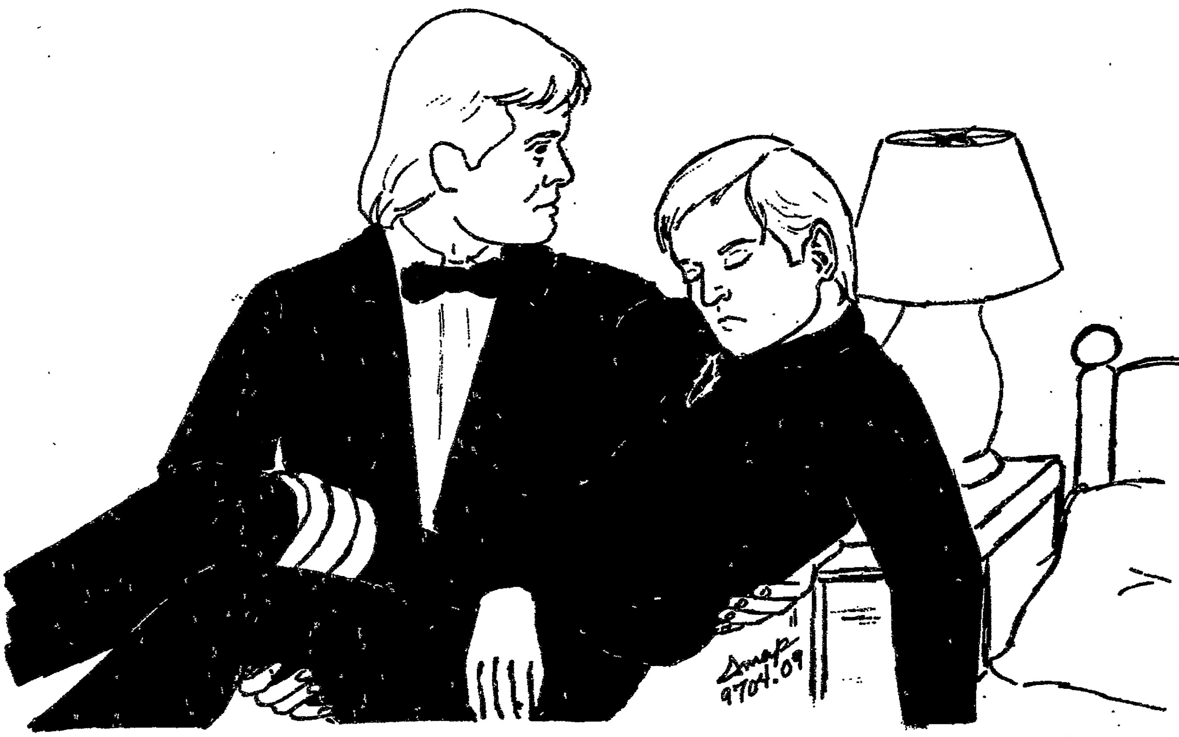
"Perhaps he'd be more comfortable on the bed," Sapphire suggested.

"He needs medical treatment. He's lost so much blood. If we can get him to the car, I can take him to the hospital," pleaded Amanda.

"That isn't possible," said Steel. "I'll put him on the bed, though." In one swift movement he gathered Illya up into his arms and deposited him gently face-down onto the bed. He frowned and pointed at the bandage on the man's leg. "Why does he have a piece of metal in there?"

"He's been shot. That's why he's bleeding. Thrush agents were shooting at him. They hit him in the shoulder but that bullet came out. They shot him in the leg, and the bullet's still in there. How could you tell?"

"I can feel it. It would help him if I take it out." His manner was just as abrupt, but Sapphire realized he was doing his best to put the other woman at ease. He began stripping the bandage off Illya's leg. Amanda dashed out to the bathroom, grabbed towels from the cupboard and wet down a couple of face cloths. She got back to the bedroom in time to see Steel flicking Illya's pants into a corner. Sapphire helped her ease a towel under the damaged leg and they sponged a lot of the blood off. Amanda was slightly disappointed but not all that surprised to see that Illya was wearing plain



white jockey underpants, the kind her dad used to wear. The wound was purple and mushy and very ugly.

"I have a scalpel with unused blades," said Amanda, trying to be helpful. Wanting to get on Steel's good side.

Steel ignored her. He inserted his right index finger into the wound. Sapphire watched dispassionately. Amanda cringed and flinched.

Illya groaned. The tendons in his neck and thighs bunched and his hands balled into fists. A moment later Steel withdrew his finger and blood began to well out of the wound. Stuck to the end of Steel's finger was a gnarled metal ball.

"Somebody threw this into his leg," Steel said matter of factly, while at the same time making it sound like a question. He was slightly incredulous of the whole thing.

"The Thrush agents shot him. How did you do that?"

Steel pulled the bullet off his finger. "Oh, magnetism," he said, almost sounding pleased with himself.

"I thought bullets were made of lead."

"This one is made of steel." He wandered out of the room, leaving the rebandaging of Illya's leg to the two women. They dragged the quilt out from under him and tucked it around him.

He stirred and stared blearily at them. "Is the bullet out?" Amanda nodded. "Thank you," he whispered. "Could I have some water, please?" She left the room for a moment and came back with a water-filled plastic sports bottle which she placed to his lips. He sucked at it for a few moments and she saw his eyes lose focus. It made her think of the way her babies had fallen asleep as she nursed them. She stroked his hair and tucked the bottle into the crook of his arm so that he could reach it easily when he woke.

She pushed the verandah door open and dragged the blood soaked mat out. She wasn't sure how she would ever get it clean, or if that would even be possible. At least with it outside, though, the smell in the bedroom would be a little less nasty. She left the balcony door open a fraction. Warm spring air flowed in. She somehow didn't think the Thrush agents would be a problem with Sapphire and Steel there. She swabbed a little at the blood on the floor, but it was an impossible task for a face cloth. She stared at Illya, watching the steady rise of his chest beneath the cover. She resisted the temptation to stroke the sock-covered foot that stuck out from under the quilt.

Sapphire stood by the door watching in silence. The detail of the ministrations was beyond her, but the caring that went on did not. She caught Amanda's eye and smiled. The younger woman looked slightly embarrassed, then smiled back. She went to stand beside Sapphire, and they both stood there, watching Illya sleep.

"Sapphire, does he remind you of anyone?"

Sapphire looked at the sleeping man. "No."

"You and Steel have worked together for a while, haven't you?"

"Oh yes. We've been together for a very long time."

"Well what did he look like when he was younger?"

"Younger? Younger than what?" Sapphire was baffled.

"Younger than he is now. When you first worked together, say."

"Steel has always looked the same. We use time differently than you."

They heard Steel's voice calling them from the study. "In here. It's in this room." He was standing at her desk, looking at her collection of Man from U.N.C.L.E. books. "These!" he said accusingly.

Amanda grabbed at the books. She plucked them from the desk, though she didn't touch Steel or the books he was holding. She didn't even look him in the eye. She clutched the books to her chest and dashed from the room.

Steel watched her leave, a look of utter confusion on his face. "Well, what am I doing wrong?" he demanded.

Sapphire took the books from his hands and placed them on the desk. "I'm not exactly sure," she said, "But I think it has something to do with the man."

"She hates and fears me because she thinks I hurt him?" he asked. "Well, that can't be right. She saw me take that piece of steel out of his leg. I helped him for her. I should have frozen him out. He's thirty years out of place and not even of this reality."

"I think you have it wrong."

He scooped one of the books up again, "No I don't. These works of fiction are stories about that man in there and..."

"Not about the breakthrough. About her hating and fearing you. I actually think she quite likes you. She seems to perceive some connection between you and the man. She likes him a lot, and she likes you because of him."

Steel looked rather taken aback at Sapphire's suggestion, as though he needed to think about the idea of himself being compared to the man on the bed. As though he needed to really ponder the thought of somebody actually liking him. "Well, she has a very strange way of demonstrating it," he said finally. "And I don't understand about that other man. How can you like somebody who's fictitious?"

"She wants to please you, Steel. If you could just," she motioned with her hands, "try to be patient with her, I think she'll do whatever you ask."

"You find this amusing, don't you?"

Sapphire's eyes widened, a look of pure innocence.

Amanda had gone into the kitchen. She sat at the table fondling her books. Steel came in. She glanced at him but avoided his eyes, then dropped her gaze back to the books.

"Would you make me some tea?" he asked. "Please."

She put the kettle on and fiddled with the teapot and cups, she got a packet of biscuits out of the cupboard and arranged them on a plate. He sat at the table, not touching the books. Sapphire came quietly into the room and sat on the opposite side of the table. She accepted the teapot, pouring hot liquid into the cups. Amanda sat beside her, unable to look at Steel, afraid her foot might touch his under the table.

Steel leaned across the table towards her. "You need to understand," he said.

She looked at him.

"Do you know who that man is? Do you know what he is?"

She picked up one of the books and fiddled with it. The picture on the front cover was of David McCallum and Robert Vaughn. "Thirty years ago," she said, "There was a television show called The Man from U.N.C.L.E. One of the characters in the show was a Russian spy called Illya Kuryakin. The man in there on my bed is Illya Kuryakin. Illya, that is to say, David McCallum, the man who played the character of Illya, is the same age as my mother. But the man on my bed, the real Illya, is years younger than me. Besides all of that, Illya is fictitious. I would really appreciate it if you would help me understand."

"You do understand then that he isn't meant to be here. That he's broken through."

"No. I don't know what that means. Broken through from where?"

"He isn't part of your reality."

"Well, no. I told you that. It was a character in a TV show thirty years ago. I don't understand how he can be here. I don't understand how he can be so young."

"Vast anachronisms cause time to break. In this case there has been a temporal torsion that's broken through a number of dimensions. There's been a temporal displacement that's gone right through into a parallel universe. There are dangerous elements involved as well." As he explained in the simplest terms he could, there was no sense of impatience or anger in Steel's tone. No harm had been intended. He understood that. He simply had a job to do and part of getting it done was going to involve this woman's trust. He felt a word of approval coming through from Sapphire, and she sensed a certain smugness about him.

Amanda was still battling with the basic concept of what Steel was trying to explain, "Do you mean the dangerous elements were those Thrush agents who were shooting at him?"

"Those are evidence of further breakthroughs. The main problem you're facing here is the way time has become twisted." As he spoke, he held the air between his hands, grasping it and plying it as though he could mold it. For a moment she lost herself in the sound of his voice and the hard arcs of his hands. It seemed so fantastic to her that his hands, which seemed so massive and powerful, were the same size exactly as Illya's.

She shook her head. She didn't understand his explanation. He talked about time as though it had mutable qualities. She looked at the clock on top of the fridge. It was five past one. She knew that couldn't be right, because it had been after two when these people came in. Then again, she had thought she had heard Puffing Billy before that. It seemed as if time were flowing backwards.

She sipped at her tea. Nobody spoke. Sapphire nibbled at one of the biscuits. In the distance she heard the school bell, and it sounded wrong. It took a moment for her to realize that she was hearing the sound in reverse, as decay followed by attack, and an abrupt ending. When she looked at the clock it was one o'clock. "How can this happen?"

"It's like a little whirlpool in time," said Steel. "At present we're on the outer rim of the vortex, as it goes on, things will happen more quickly. As though time is being wound at a greater and greater speed. Backwards. Once you get to the middle of the whirlpool the whole process of what you understand as time becomes totally chaotic. Under those circumstances it is impossible for your body to continue to function."

"I'll be dead," she said quietly.

"You'll all be dead."

"Who "all"?"

"Oh, back to uh...?" he looked questioningly at Sapphire.

"April twenty-seventh, nineteen sixty-eight," she said.

"What? I don't understand. How can something that's already happened be destroyed? How can you change the past?"

"I'm not changing anything," said Steel defensively. "I'm trying to keep it all just where it belongs. You're the one who wants to change things. You're the one taking things out of where they belong." He punched an accusing finger at her.

Steel! He heard the cautioning tone of his partner inside his head. He was angry now, though. He didn't like to be questioned and he didn't like getting involved in petty, stupid arguments and explanations. He had a job to do and all he wanted was to just get on and get it done. He walked out of the room, unwilling to continue with this ridiculous round of self-justification.

Sapphire watched the other woman's reaction to Steel's huff. She could see tears but Amanda turned her head and when she looked back at Sapphire, they were gone. She stared at the cover of one of the books for a very long time, one of her fingers resting on the picture of Illya there. Then her gaze shifted and Sapphire saw that she was looking at a framed picture on the shelf. She took the picture from where it was sitting and looked at it.

"School photo," said Amanda.

It showed two children in matching green hooded tops. The boy was older. He had blonde hair and blue eyes, Amanda's coloring, though his face was longer and his jaw stronger than hers. The little girl had dark hair and large brown eyes surrounded by generous dark, thick lashes. The shape of her mouth and cheekbones echoed her mother's.

"They're lovely-looking children."

"They're wonderful children. Is what he said true?"

"About things being destroyed?"

"Right back to nineteen sixty-eight?"

"That's right."

"I was only eleven."

Sapphire said nothing. She simply waited. Amanda reached over to her and took the photograph of the children. Her gaze flicked between the book and the photo.

"It would be the end of the world, and I'd be just a little kid. And my children would never even get born. I'd never even meet their father." Her voice trailed off and she gazed again at the book. "Sapphire, how can this happen? Suddenly there's a man lying on my bed and he's practically bleeding to death, and you tell me about this...thing that defies all the laws of physics I've ever heard off. All I did was write a story."

Steel came back into the room, somewhat calmer now, and resumed his place at the table. "Things have been taken away from their correct point in time," he said. "That's what causes the problem."

"But how does it happen?"

"I don't think my grasp of trans-unification physics is quite up to giving a comprehensive lay explanation."

"I'm not stupid," she said defensively.

"Then you have to accept that something must be done."

She nodded. Worried now as she watched Sapphire handling her books. Something had to be done, but why did it seem to have to involve her collection? What could be more harmless than a bunch of old paperbacks?

"It isn't the books," Sapphire decided finally.

Amanda gave a sigh of relief. She had the feeling that Sapphire's decision was final and no further correspondence would be entered into. If Sapphire had decided that it was the books, she was certain she would never have seen them alive again.

"Then it must be something else in that other room," Steel decided. He finished his tea and picked up another biscuit. "Show me."

The hallway to the study led them past the bedroom though, and Amanda went in to look at Illya. He had drunk nearly half the bottle of water but his face was deathly pale. He tried to rouse himself when he heard them come into the room, but he seemed unable to keep his consciousness focused. His speech slurred and his eyes kept closing, though his breathing was shallow and distressed, as though he had been running for a very long time.

Sapphire tried to understand the connection between Steel and the man on the bed. Perhaps if he was standing he might be about the same height as Steel. It seemed a tenuous connection, though. Amanda was holding the man's hand, placing her fingers awkwardly on his wrist. "Tell me when ten seconds is up," she said, "And then tell me when another thirty seconds is up."

Sapphire counted the seconds and told her. She laid the hand back onto the bed and tucked the cover around it. "His pulse and respiration are elevated," she said, "and I think it's because of blood loss. If you help me get him to the car I could get him to a hospital. Surely he doesn't have to die."

A pained expression crossed Steel's face. *I thought she said she wasn't stupid,* he directed to Sapphire. "Once you leave this house," he said, very patiently, "time flows backwards. You would spend the rest of what's left of eternity opening and closing your front door. You couldn't take this man to hospital even if he were real."

"He is real," she insisted.

"You told me you have a scalpel with clean blades."

"Yes."

"Go and get it." He knelt by the head of the bed and peered at Illya's face.

"You're not going to hurt him, are you?" she asked suspiciously.

"No. I'm not going to hurt him." He pressed the spout of the drink bottle between Illya's lips and squeezed the water in, "Here. Drink some more of this. Have as much as you can."

By the time Amanda got back with the scalpel handle and new blades, Steel had forced almost all of the water into Illya. He ignored the handle and took the little box of blades. He slipped out one of the little packets of waxy paper, peeled out the blade and let the paper fall to the floor. He drew a deep semi-circle across the ball of his left thumb, leaving a scarlet line. He held the bleeding thumb close to Illya's lips. Amanda saw that where the blood fell it did not make drops but little puffs of dust that made her think of rust flaking off the bodies of decaying cars.

"What are you doing?"

"His problem appears to be lack of oxygen-carrying capacity in his blood. I am trying to rectify this so that we can get on with our business."

"But how...?"

"The haem compound is made up of iron molecules. I'm just giving him some of mine in a way that his body can use them most efficiently. I'm sorry it can't be medical attention, but under the circumstances he's lucky to be alive."

Sapphire had refilled the sports bottle. Steel squeezed what he deemed to be a sufficient amount of little red puffs of iron into Illya's mouth. Illya's teeth looked dramatically red. "Here." Steel pressed the bottle into Illya's hand. "Drink as much of this as you can." He stood up, sucking his cut thumb.

Illya sucked on the bottle, and rinsed his mouth, swallowing what he'd been given with a grimace, as though it tasted very bad. "Have you seen Napoleon?" he asked finally.

"I hope not," said Steel as he walked out of the room, entirely misunderstanding who Napoleon was. Amanda watched him go. She hung Illya's clothes on the end of the bed and gave him his gun.

"Thank you," he said. He smiled at her with the glowing warmth that stunned her when she saw it on her videos, and nearly overwhelmed her in real life. When she'd rolled him into coma position earlier, she had felt the solid reality of his body, hot with adrenaline and wet with blood. Now there was just this wonderful sweetness.

"I'd do...anything for you," she said. She was suddenly aware that she was one of the innocents on the show, and like them she would follow him to the ends of the earth, or at least the very depths of the worst Thrush plot.

"Just look after yourself," he said. "Keep safe." He sipped at the water and closed his eyes again.

Sapphire and Steel had gone into the study. She rested her hands lightly on the computer. "It's in here," she told him. "There are stories written about the man, and in one story, the most recent, he is in the wrong time."

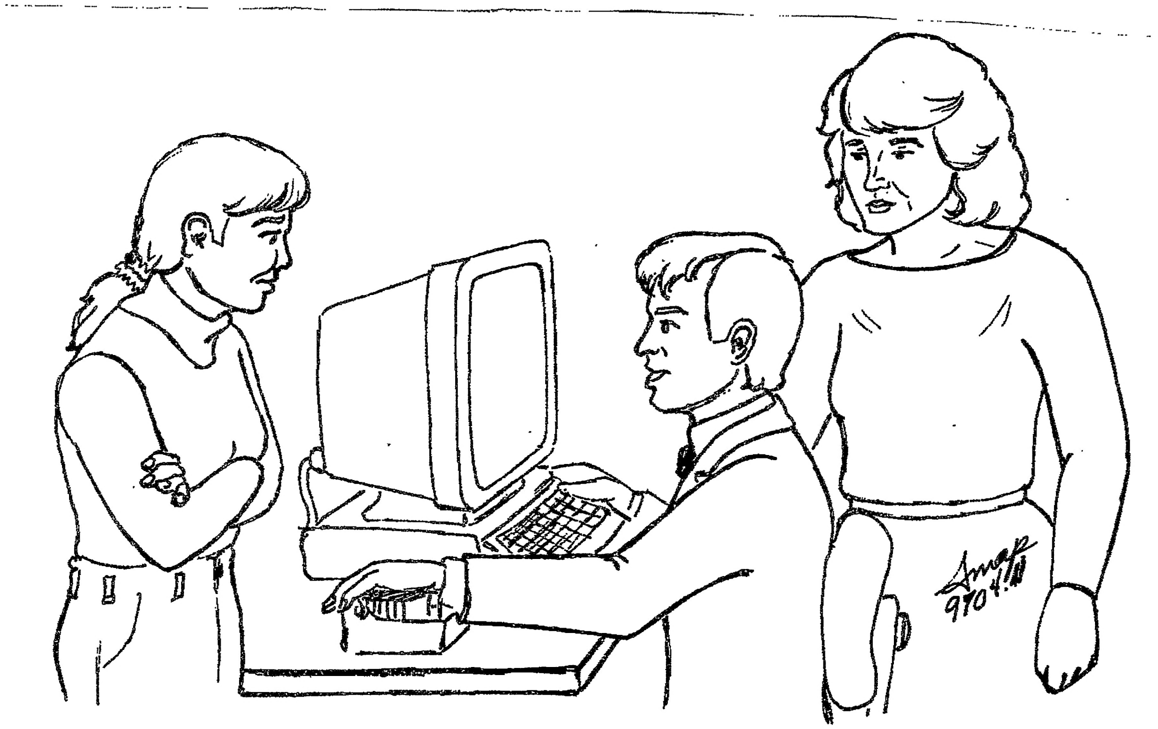
Amanda arrived in time to hear what Sapphire had said. She bit her lip, though she wasn't sure why she should feel guilty about this. "I write fiction," she said. "It's just a hobby. Lots of people write stuff like this and I just wanted to do a story where Napoleon and Illya were in the nineties, only they were still...you know...themselves. It's kind of a time travel story."

"Time travel story," muttered Steel, trying to bear in mind what Sapphire had told him, and not sound too disgusted.

"Well, I know I'm not exactly H.G. Wells, but..."

Steel put a hand up to his face. "Just don't mention that name," he said. "Please." He took a step towards the computer.

A series of strange clicking noises came from the desk. They sounded oddly familiar to Amanda, though she couldn't quite place the



sound. It wasn't the computer accessing its hard disk, or the modem. Two men dressed in brown overalls rolled out from under the desk. They carried the odd guns that Thrush agents used. The noise had been the sound of them arming the guns.

"Look," said the shorter Thrush agent, "it's the U.N.C.L.E. guy, Kuryakin." The muzzle of his gun was pointed at Steel's middle. The other one had his gun directed, unwavering, at Sapphire's face.

"He looks funny. Old or something," said the taller.

"Well we don't want him getting any older," said the shorter Thrush man. There was the sudden thundering boom of the gun and Steel went crashing backwards.

Amanda didn't remember falling, but she was under the chair, whimpering. Gunsmoke stung her eyes and she wasn't sure if they were watering as a reaction to that, or if she was just crying with fear. She could see Steel's legs from where she was huddled. They were sticking straight out, unmoving. Sapphire was still standing exactly where she had been. Amanda thought she must have been paralyzed by fear, but then she saw the other woman turn casually and look down at Steel.

"Are you all right?"

"You were a little slow," came his grumbling reply.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think they'd move so quickly."

Amanda peeped out from under her chair. The Thrush men were gone. Steel climbed laboriously to his feet, leaning against the wall for support. "Look," he said petulantly. "They put a hole in my shirt." There was a blackened smudge on the front of his shirt just above his belt buckle and a hole about the size of a fifty-cent coin. It almost looked as if it had been melted there. There was a hot smell, like molten metal in the air.

"And it hurts," Steel added, as if it was an afterthought and not that important. There was no blood though, and Amanda could see carbon-dusted pink flesh through that hole. He wasn't wearing a bulletproof vest.

Sapphire, satisfied that Steel would survive his ordeal, motioned towards the computer. "We'd better deal with this."

Amanda, finally out from under her chair, looked around for the Thrush men. They were gone. "What happened?" she asked. "Where did they go?"

"I sent them back," said Sapphire.

"Back to where?"

"About fifteen minutes ago. I took them back in time."

It seemed prudent not to take this line of reasoning further. Amanda felt her sense of understanding had been compromised enough already. Steel stood by the desk, rubbing at his stomach and looking at the computer monitor. Amanda pushed the chair in beside him. "W-would you like to sit down?" He eased himself into the chair. Despite the fact that it had done a lot less damage to Steel than it would have to anyone else, the bullet really had hurt him. And she couldn't help remembering the way her guts had tied themselves into knots when she'd seen him go crashing down.

"Now, this story," said Steel, "about time travel. It involves the man in the other room."

"Illya."

"Illya. And Napoleon. He said something about Napoleon and you mentioned him as well. How is Napoleon involved in this?"

"Well he's Illya's partner."

"Did he travel through time to be Illya's partner?"

"No. They're contemporaries."

"Ah. It's not Napoleon Bonaparte then," he said seriously.

She almost laughed. "No. Napoleon Solo."

"Good. Is the story all here on the computer?"

"Yes. I wrote it on my word processor."

"Did you print it onto paper or save it on any of these disks?" He indicated the floppies that littered her desk.

"Uh, no. I know I should. I could..."

He held up a hand. "No. We don't want that. What about notes? Do you have any notes on paper here?"

She shook her head, "No. I just made it up out of my head. The whole story is right there on my computer."

"I'd like you to promise me something," Steel said.

Sapphire nodded to herself. It was a sneaky trick, but she had the feeling that Amanda would do almost anything to please her partner. She would keep a promise to him.

"What is it?"

"No more time machine stories. No more H.G. Wells. Keep people where they belong."

"All right."

"Do you promise?"

"I promise," she said earnestly, gazing at him, "No more time travel stories."

Steel seemed satisfied with this. He wrapped his arms around the computer and hugged it against his chest. Sapphire stood by impassively. Amanda watched curiously. The only sound in the room was the hum of the little fan inside the computer. Movement on the screen caught Amanda's attention. There was a lot of garbage written there. Something hit her in the back of the head. She reached up and pulled a paper clip out of her hair. It seemed like an odd thing to happen.

The room was suddenly filled with little snapping noises. Paper clips were lifting themselves off the desks and flying through the air at Steel. Pages held together by staples were dragging themselves across the floor and adhering to his feet. More frightening than that, though, the drawers of the filing cabinet were sliding themselves out and dragging the whole cabinet across the floor to where Steel was sitting. A bunch of keys hit him in the ear, and the unused scalpel blades pulled themselves off the shelf and embedded themselves in Steel's shoulder.

"Now I've got holes in my jacket at well," he grumbled.

"Finished?" asked Sapphire.

"Yes. It's all clear now." All the little paper clips and staples suddenly rained down on to the floor and the filing cabinet halted in its tracks. Steel flinched slightly as Sapphire pulled the scalpel blades out of his shoulder. "I'll need a new jacket now," was all he said. The blood that stained his jacket was normal, though, not the strange dust that he had fed to Illya.

Outside the window Amanda was suddenly aware of birdsong and distant traffic noise, as though the real world had suddenly come back. She could hear the ticking of the clock in the hall.

"That's half the job done." said Steel. "Now, the crossover. Where did Illya first come in?"

"The balcony," Amanda indicated the bedroom. "He was climbing up the balcony."

"That must be its weakest point then. I'll open it so we can get him back through and then I'll make sure it closes properly."

Amanda followed Sapphire and Steel into the bedroom. Illya lay sleeping on the bed, though he held his gun on his chest. Amanda suffered the brief fear that Steel might just open up whatever it was that linked her universe with Illya Kuryakin's and then push the poor man over the balcony. She didn't think he would, but he gave the impression that he might.

Steel positioned himself on the balcony where Illya had first arrived. "There aren't any scalpel blades out here are there?" he asked.

There was a stillness for a moment and then rosellas began to rain down a shower of gumnuts onto the roof of the verandah. Amanda could hear a thumping noise. Someone was climbing up the verandah again. She backed into the room, afraid it was the Thrush agents back again. It was the dark head of Napoleon Solo, though, that appeared over the railing. He came upright beside Steel and focused on the other man, a look of disbelief forming on his face. He opened his mouth as if he was about to say something.

Steel pointed in through the bedroom door. "He's in there."

Solo followed the direction Steel had indicated and saw Illya lying on the bed. He smiled with sudden relief and stepped through the door, glancing oddly at Steel as he passed him. He grabbed Illya by the foot and shook it. "If you're through with your afternoon nap, I think it might be time to leave."

Illya rolled out of the bed in a single fluid motion, and then sank down to the floor as his leg slowly gave out. "I suppose a little help getting dressed is out of the question," he said hopefully.

Napoleon picked the pants and shoes off the end of the bed. He looked at the bloody mess of the pants. They could almost have stood up by themselves. "You really should take more care with your clothes, Illya. Mr Waverly won't be happy about seeing the cost of a new suit on your expense account," he chided. "When we get back I can recommend a very good dry cleaner. He does repairs."

"Good. I'll check my whole body in." Illya couldn't even put his own right shoe on. He sat impassively while Napoleon did that for him. "Do you still have the prototype?"

"Right here." Napoleon patted the pocket of his jacket. "It's just as well one of us can manage to get through an assignment intact."

"How about next time I sneak into the warehouse and steal things and you create the diversion and get yourself shot?" snapped Illya.

"What? And totally destroy the great teamwork we have going here?" asked Napoleon. "Now, are you going to walk, or do I have to carry you?"

Illya struggled to his feet, draped his arm around his partner's shoulders, and allowed himself to be lugged to the end of the bed. Napoleon turned towards the door.

"This way," Steel said, standing on the balcony.

Napoleon paused and looked intently at Steel as they came onto the verandah. He looked as if he was going to say something, and then changed his mind. It was Illya who spoke. "Thank you," he said.

Steel nodded but said nothing. Neither of the men showed any sign of recognition.

"Who is he?" said Napoleon.

Illya shrugged and then wished he hadn't. "I don't know, but just wait 'til you read my report."

"You must be sick. You're looking forward to paperwork."

"I'm looking forward to getting home in as few pieces as possible. I'm just glad he's not with Thrush."

Illya looked back over his shoulder at Steel. The two agents took a step towards the verandah rail and they were suddenly gone. Amanda followed them, leaning over the rail to see if they had fallen. But there was nobody below. "What happened? Where did they go?" She turned to where Sapphire and Steel had been standing but now no one was there.

She stepped back through the open door and went into every room, finishing with the study. The house was empty. She looked at the computer, still humming quietly to itself, but there seemed to be something wrong with the screen. It was covered with what looked like an oil slick or a rainbow. She tried resetting the computer but nothing happened. The rainbow reminded her of the time one of the kids had stuck a magnet to the side of the TV set. She turned the screen off and on to degauss it, but it didn't work. Fantastic as it seemed, Steel had caused a magnetic anomaly that had destroyed the memory in her computer and ruined her monitor. Worse than that, he had taken her story away. She knew she could never rewrite it. She had made a promise to Steel that she knew she couldn't break. Pictures of David McCallum stared at her from her desk.

She walked back to the balcony, where she had last seen them. Or him. David McCallums from other times and other dimensions. He existed in a multitude of places and beings.

She wondered how her friends would feel if she told them Illya Kuryakin had been in her bed. They'd probably be torn between homicidal jealousy and a strong desire to have her committed. She could cut the blood-soaked mat into hundreds of little bits and sell them as icons, relics of an idol. The mat was clean, though. There was no blood anywhere. There was no trace of Illya or Napoleon or the very strange Sapphire and Steel, except for the slip of waxed paper that Steel had removed from the scalpel blade and dropped beside the bed. It would mean nothing to anyone else. She held the slip of paper between thumb and finger and considered it. She hadn't even had the presence of mind to take a photograph, though it probably would have seemed a ghoulish thing to do. But she had nothing to keep and she was bereft of her story.

She heard the school bell ringing and suddenly she wanted to make things very perfect for her family. She dropped the scalpel paper into the waste bin and went to hang out the laundry before her children got home.

TALES OF THE SEA WOLF

Tale Two: The Homecoming

Nora Mayers

SOLOMON'S ISLAND NAVY HOSPITAL
SOUTH PACIFIC
1942

Joe Brady was scheduled for transport in the morning, on his way to the States and the National Naval Hospital in Maryland for surgery, convalescence, and therapy.

The machinegun bullet that had torn through his body had done more damage than he should have survived, but he'd surprised the base physicians by living.

But now something was wrong. Joe felt as though a massive weight had settled on his chest; he tasted blood in his mouth. He was suffocating, dying with help a mere canvas-flap door away where the Navy surgeon on duty for the evening was finishing up last minute paperwork before checking his patients one last time.

Joe's eyes rolled back, his fingers spasmed at his sides; he felt that he was drowning. The iron taste in his mouth intensified, and his vision and hearing began to fade as his life ebbed away by slow degrees.

He had lost almost all of his senses, wavering on the edge of unconsciousness and death, when they discovered him.

By the time the startled skeleton staff of hospital workers had secured him to a gurney and rushed him into surgery, he knew nothing.

Nothing except the quiet, peaceful place deep in his soul where he'd retreated once before after he'd been wounded. He settled there now, content to stay for as long as necessary. It was a pleasant place, furnished with the familiar essence of his own personality—the emotions, nuances, inclinations and beliefs that made Joe Brady who he was. He was aware of himself there, as he could never be in the "outside" where so many other sensual stimuli interfered, intersected, and contradicted the purity of spirit and self that he found here.

"Hiya, Joe," a familiar voice called to him.

Joe turned. When he saw who had called him, his face lit with joy. "Brooklyn!" He rushed to his friend and crushed him in a fierce embrace.

Clarence grinned at Joe's uncharacteristic greeting.

Joe pulled back and held Clarence at arm's length. "Brooklyn, you're alive!"

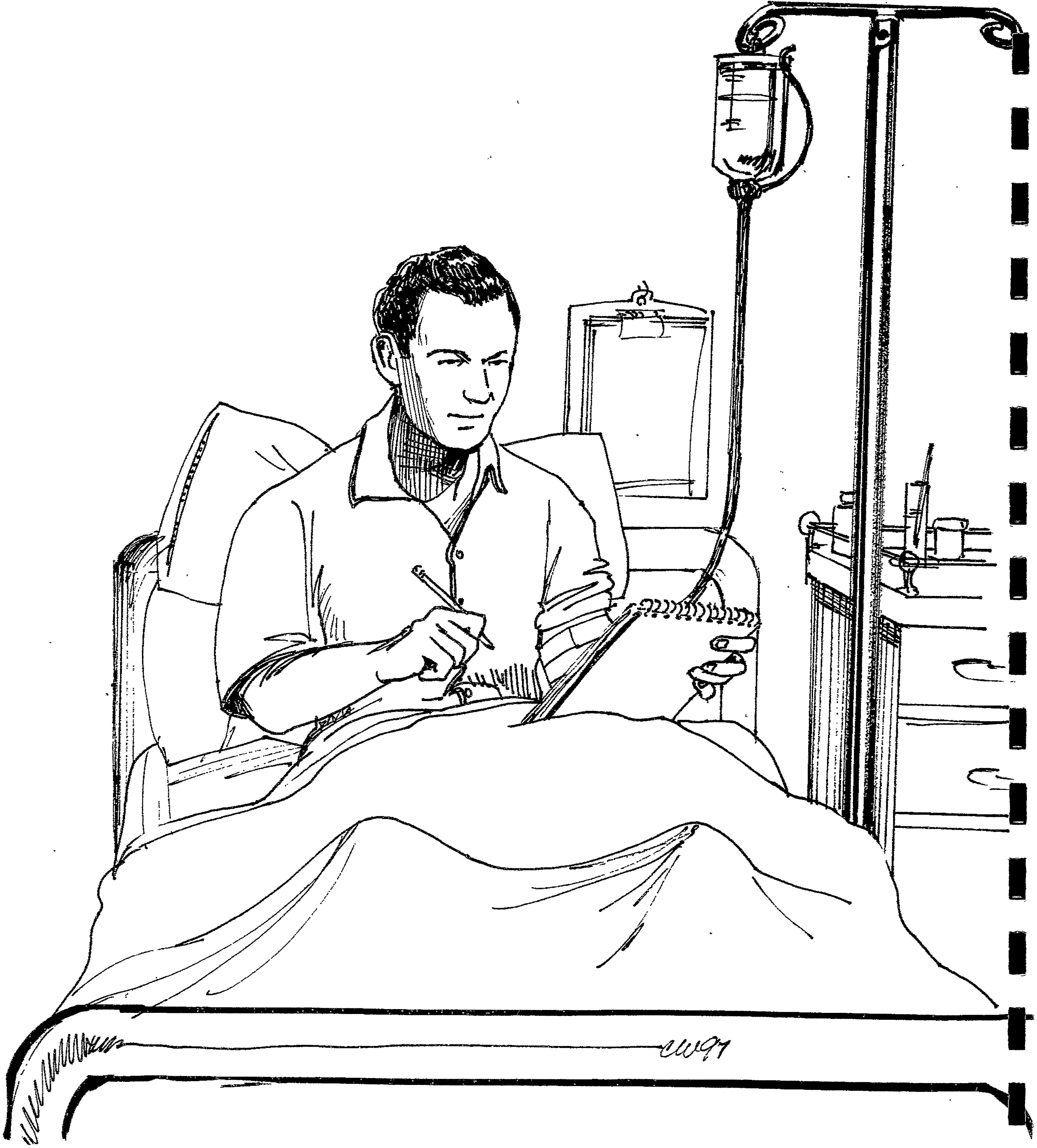
"Who says?" Clarence challenged.

Joe stared at him, baffled. "Well, I hate to be the one to break it to ya, kid, but either you're alive or I'm..." he hesitated, not liking the possibilities finishing that sentence would make.

Clarence chuckled. "Don't worry, you're not dead. Not yet anyway. I won't kid you, you could be any second, though. When you get yourself shot, Joe, you don't do it halfway!"

"Look who's talking!" Joe protested.

"Yeah, but I didn't mess around with all that in-between stuff. Hospitals, blood transfusions, needles. Nah, I just sorta..." Clarence waved his hand. "Snuffed out."


cw97

The familiar crushing grief Joe had felt since Clarence's death returned full force.

Clarence's expression softened. "Aw, Joe, c'mon, don't feel so bad. It happened so fast that I didn't feel anything, honest."

"But *I* did," Joe answered. "When they told me what happened to ya, kid, I...well, I've never felt that bad about anything in my whole life. It was like...like some part of me died, too. A big part."

Clarence looked embarrassed. "Gee, Joe...thanks. That's nice of you to say."

"Am I dreamin'?" Joe asked. "How can you be here?"

"Well...where do you think here is?"

Joe looked around at the nothing that surrounded them. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Aw, sure you do," Clarence answered. He sat on airy nothing and Joe stooped until he was at eye level with him. "This is who you are, what you are," Clarence explained. "And I'm a part of that." He shrugged. "There's a whole lot more here than me, of course, but right now it's me you're thinkin' about the most." He gave a bashful grin. "Never knew you cared."

"Aw clam up," Joe said, and was instantly sorry for it. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "I always said that if I got the chance somehow I'd be...I'd be nicer to you."

"What for?" Clarence asked, baffled.

"'Cause you deserve it." Joe stood and began to pace. "I was always yellin' at ya, Brooklyn. It even drove me crazy sometimes."

"I always knew why you were yellin', though," Clarence answered. "And it was usually 'cause you were mad at yourself, not me."

"Doesn't matter," Joe said firmly. "I was wrong to do it. I feel bad about it."

"Yeah, I know."

"There's a lot of things I feel bad about. Like teasin' you about your girl." His face crumpled in dismay and he stooped again in front of his friend. "I feel bad about you and your girl, Clarence. You can't get married now the way you wanted to. You can't have those dozen kids you said you wanted. It's not fair!" He stood, angry now. "You're just a kid! You got a whole lifetime ahead of you! Why'd this happen to you? Why'd this happen?"

"Happens to everybody sooner or later," Clarence answered.

"That's not what I mean!" Joe railed. He grasped Clarence's shoulders and hauled him to his feet. "Why you and not me? It was supposed to be me! Why, Brooklyn! I gotta know. I gotta know!"

"'Cause that's what was supposed to happen," Clarence explained. "It wasn't your time yet. It was my time."

Tears tracked down Joe's face and he was unashamed of them. "You're only twenty years old, how can it be your time?"

Clarence was about to answer when something caught his attention. He smiled, then gave Joe a grin. "Hey, guess what? You're gonna be all right!"

"What?"

"They pulled you back," Clarence happily explained. "You'll wake up soon. Now try and get it right this time, will ya? Get home the way you're supposed to, and stop foolin' around!"

Light infiltrated Joe's private domain. He heard the familiar voice of his doctor, felt pain, was aware of hands grasping him, moving him.

"'Bye, buddy," Clarence said. "Thanks for checkin' in. Don't worry about me, I'm okay. You gotta think about you now, and how you're gonna live the rest of your life."

The light became brighter. "Brooklyn, wait, don't go," Joe pleaded.

"Don't worry," Clarence said. "After all we've been through together, I'll always be a part of you, Joe. Don't worry about that. You won't ever forget, not ever...and neither will I."

Joe broke through the thin layer of unconsciousness and emerged fully into the light.

"He's coming around," someone said.

"Brooklyn," Joe groaned.

"'Round the clock surveillance until he stabilizes," the doctor ordered. "Call the courier and tell them that this one's going to be delayed a week because of emergency surgery on a collapsed lung. If he has family, tell them that he's still coming home, but later."

"'Bye, Joe," the last resonance of Clarence's voice whispered to Joe's spirit.

Joe wept.

Clarence Doolittle came home on a rainy afternoon.

By the time the hearse arrived in Brooklyn mid-afternoon at the church of Saint John the Divine, sheets of hard driving rain had already muddied the carefully prepared churchyard and soaked the mourners as they scurried from their cars to the sanctuary.

The bells of the church tolled mournfully for one of their own. Clarence had been christened in the ancient church, had been an altar boy, and an assistant choir director.

Now he was being buried there.

Susan Abbott stood discreetly in an alcove near the church entrance, out of sight, careful not to attract the attention of Clarence's grieving family and fiancee, or the news reporters who huddled outside in the rain, protecting themselves and their cameras beneath wilting umbrellas, hoping to get a glimpse of Susan, the fledgling movie star, for their gossip columns and newsreels.

Overnight Susan had gone from being just another Hollywood hopeful to being a full-fledged celebrity. Every fan magazine and newspaper in the country had run full accounts of her narrow escape in the South Pacific, and of Clarence's heroic sacrifice to save her.

But the public and press were even more fascinated by Joe—the pinup girl's handsome young fiancee, struck down by enemy fire during the same battle in which Clarence had been killed. The public couldn't get enough, and when the reporters couldn't provide new stories, they invented them.

Susan was suddenly the hottest name in Hollywood.

Which was why she hid now in the small church alcove with her six-year old nephew, Donald, and with her friend, Jose Iturbi, the MGM musical conductor who'd given her her break in the film industry—trying not to attract attention to herself or divert it from Clarence.

She watched from the small oval window as the casket was unloaded by four Naval honor guards from the back of the hearse.

The American flag that draped the casket and the men who bore it were soaked within seconds.

Tears welled in Susan's eyes; she clasped Iturbi's hand. "He saved my life," she whispered. "But I can't remember. He's being buried here today because of me. I ought to remember!"

Iturbi looked at her with sympathy. "He saved your life, yes, but he did what he was supposed to do, what he was trained to do."

Susan closed her eyes. "He was just a boy. Joe was right—I had no business being there! I thought I was doing my patriotic duty, and because of me, Clarence is dead."

"How many men died that day?" Iturbi gently asked.

"Only one died saving me," Susan whispered.

Donald tugged on his Aunt's sleeve. "Aunt Susie, is Clarence in there?" he asked, pointing at the sealed casket as it was finally brought into the church.

Susan stooped until she was at eye-level with the boy. "Clarence is in heaven. Do you remember that we talked about it?"

Donald nodded, but still looked confused. "But—"

"We'll talk later, darling," Susan interrupted. "Hush now." She stood as the honor guard bore the casket past the alcove.

Susan held her breath as Clarence's mother and two sisters walked past, hoping they wouldn't see her. They were too absorbed in grief to notice her, but Susan wasn't as lucky with Clarence's fiancee, Pam.

Pam hesitated as she walked past and spotted Susan. The girl's eyes were red and swollen from crying, and the handkerchief she carried in her black-gloved hands was limp.

Pam's plain looks and ordinary black mourning dress were in sharp contrast to Susan's elegant beauty and stylish dark clothing. Pam could never have been anything more than ordinary, and Susan could have been nothing less than glamorous.

Susan shivered, realizing how much Pam must hate her for costing Clarence his life. But to her astonishment, Pam smiled and reached out a hand to her. "Are you hidin' back here, honey?" she asked Susan gently.

Susan hesitated before accepting her hand. "No, not hiding," she lied. "I just didn't want to...didn't want to—"

"We didn't want to intrude upon family and friends who have come to say goodbye to Clarence," Iturbi finished.

Pam blinked. "Well...you're friends, aren't ya?" Her voice was unsteady, her eyes still shining with unshed tears, but her voice was kind. She nodded. "Clarence would be glad you're here. I wish Joe could be here, too—that woulda meant most to Clarence. How is Joe, Susie? Is he comin' home soon?"

"He's...he's still on the island," Susan stammered.

"Is he gonna be all right?"

Susan's voice was almost gone. "I don't know."

Pam sniffled and squeezed Susan's hand. "He will be. Odds are all for it. It wouldn't be right to lose Clarence and Joe at the same time, would it? C'mon. You three come sit with me. We got somethin' in common." She tousled Donald's hair and took his hand, leading him into the chapel.

Susan and Iturbi followed.

Flying wounded patients back to the States from a war zone was not standard procedure. But given the nature of Joe's injuries and his immediate need for surgery at the National Naval Hospital in Maryland—surgery that couldn't wait several weeks for a ship to lumber into port—the risk of flying him through potentially dangerous territory, to Hawaii first, then to Washington, D.C. for the final ride by ambulance to Bethesda, Maryland, seemed the lesser of evils. There was always the danger of intercepting enemy planes, but there was no question that Joe would not survive a lengthy journey by sea.

After three years in the Navy, Joe was delighted to discover that water would not be his means home. The word 'civilian' had a happy ring to it, and outside of showing up back home in his dress uniform, he intended to put all reminders of his nautical life behind him.

Aside from the fact that an IV attached to his arm was dispensing a yellow fluid into his veins and that he was propped at an exaggerated angle on a heavily-padded hospital gurney to protect his shattered back, Joe could have been any other young man in his best uniform, waiting to return home.

He felt a little conspicuous, propped on the gurney like a dressmaker's dummy waiting to be stuck in a shop window. A light blanket covered him from his waist to his feet, disguising the fact that from the waist down he was all but unclothed. It made him feel like an old man sitting on someone's front stoop. But his handsome uniform jacket and black tie were top form.

Heavily drugged for pain and feeling artificially happy, he hummed off-key as the hospital crew worked around him. He stopped humming occasionally and raised an eyebrow whenever a particularly comely nurse bent to retrieve something from within his limited field of vision.

One of them, pretty and young, noticed his interest and gave him a disapproving look as she stood, tugging self-consciously on the hem of her skirt.

The head nurse laughed and shook her head. "Don't worry, Ronnie," she assured the modest young lady. "He's not in any shape to jump off that gurney and do anything about that look in his eyes." She grinned at Joe. "Are you, hot stuff?"

Joe gave her his best look of boyish innocence. "Who, me?"

"Oh don't give me that," the nurse scoffed. "I know your type just by looking at you. If you were hale and hearty you'd have every female on the island wondering just how you were gonna make good on that look in those pretty brown eyes of yours." She cupped his chin in a firm hand. "How'd a sweet-looking Romeo like you manage to wind up in a joint like this?"

Joe made an impatient face. "I stood in front of the Jap with the big gun and said please shoot me."

"Oh you're a cute one," she said, giving his cheek an appreciative pat. "Cute and safe. I wouldn't be talking to you this way, sugar, if I thought you could do something about it."

"I might surprise you," Joe challenged.

"You might at that!" she chuckled before turning and walking off to see to some other duty. "And I might just enjoy it!"

Joe would have enjoyed watching her walk away, but turning that far around was beyond his physical capabilities. He grinned, then frowned abruptly as a horrifying thought occurred to him. If he couldn't even appreciate a great pair of legs because he couldn't move, how was he gonna—

"Hey, doc!" he yelped in alarm as his surgeon stopped beside his gurney to check his IV. "Doc, can I ask you something?"

"Shoot," the surgeon answered, then glanced up wryly. "You'll pardon the expression."

Joe ignored his attempt at humor. "Listen, Doc, I'm gettin' married when I get home."

"That's nice," the physician muttered, not sounding terribly interested.

"June," Joe said.

"Uh-huh. Swell."

"Ten weeks."

"Yeah, well good."

Joe hesitated, embarrassed to be asking questions about the one subject in life in which he had always felt an unequaled master. "Doc, what I want to know is...well, what I mean is..." he heaved a heavy sigh. "Hell. What I want to know is, am I gonna be able to...I mean will I be all right to—"

The doctor's head came up sharply as Joe stumbled over his words. Brady was doped to the eyebrows and not fully aware of his own situation, but the physician still found his question astonishing. He gave him an incredulous look. "Are you asking what I think you're asking?"

Joe looked at him uncertainly. "I don't know, am I?"

The physician snorted and looked down at the clipboard in his hands. "June, huh?"

"Yeah, about ten weeks."

"Uh-huh. You are aware that you've got one surgery scheduled two days after you get to the States, and another a month after that, right?"

"Sure."

"Your shoulders were broken in so many places I've lost count. You have no erector muscles left to speak of and your guts look like swiss cheese."

"So?"

"You nearly died last week after a lung collapsed...and you want to know if you'll be able to make good on your wedding night?"

Joe thought a moment, then nodded. "Yeah."

The physician didn't mean to be unkind, but he couldn't help snickering. He shook his head and walked back in the direction of his makeshift office.

Joe scowled after him. "I guess that means dancing's out for a while, too, huh?"

The doctor grinned.

"Glad he thinks it's funny," Joe muttered and heaved a sigh. Twelve months at sea, one month stuck in this godforsaken hospital in the Pacific, two surgeries when he got home, then God knew how long in bed recovering. What a waste of time.

The same nurse who'd flirted with him approached on his right, holding a large hypodermic.

"Hey, what's that?" Joe protested.

"Time to go beddy-bye, pretty boy," she said, rolling up his sleeve.

"What!" Joe yelped. "Hey, I'm already on painkillers, what do I need that for? I'm goin' home!"

"Uh-huh," she agreed. "And when you get there, some pretty lady can wake you up with a kiss, how's that?"

"That's days away! You're not gonna put me out for four days!"

She gave him a look of challenge. "Who says I'm not?" She slid the needle home. "Trust me, Romeo, you're not gonna be very happy spending all that time in the air with every little air pocket jostling what's left of your back. Not to mention all your other insignificant little boo-boos. Now shut up, be a good boy, and go nighty-night."

Joe was angry now. "It's my back and you can't do this to me! I'm a civilian now, I got rights again! And if I wanna stay awake long enough to see where the hell I'm...where the..." his head dropped abruptly forward, though he still struggled to keep his eyes open.

The nurse shook her head in amazement. "It's no wonder the Japs didn't kill you—you're too stubborn to die!"

He lost the battle in the next instant, and the nurse's jovial expression sobered as she lifted his chin with one hand to make certain that he was out.

He didn't have much of a future, she thought sadly. It was a shame, too. He was such a looker, this one! And he was brash and opinionated enough to get just about anything that he wanted out of life.

But there was no way anyone would ever convince her that he'd walk again. The only saving grace was that his spine had remained miraculously undamaged, but without the strength in his shoulders and back to support his upper body, she was sure he'd never get out of a wheelchair or a bed again.

The nurse shook her head, smiled humorlessly and pinched his cheek. "You're so cute!" She adjusted his tie, brushed down the lapels of his handsome uniform and laid his dress hat by his side. Then she gently tilted the gurney back until he was prone and summoned an orderly. "This civilian's all ready to go home," she said.

"Oh boy, oh boy, this is gonna be great!" Stanley Witherspoon, publicity director at MGM Studios, was nearly jumping up and down with excitement. "Susie, honey, when you get yourself engaged you do it to the right guy, dontcha? The public is gonna eat this up!" He put his thumbs together in front of him and peered through his hands as though they were a movie frame. "Can't you see it? Movie starlet's war hero fiancee comes home. He's good looking, he's charming, and best of all, he's a wreck! Why? Because he's one of *our* boys fighting *our* war, that's why!" He grinned happily. "On top of that funeral you went to a few days ago for the poor schmoe who saved your life, you're gonna be top box office in months! Susie, baby, I couldn't have done any better with your publicity if I'd planned it!"

Susan stared at him, uncertain whether to be flabbergasted, angry, or just baffled. That Stanley Witherspoon was a social idiot was already common knowledge. But that he was also the best publicity agent in the industry was equally well known; he usually got his way about things.

Not this time, Susan thought. She leaned across the small prop table that separated them and braced her hands upon it. "My fiancee," she said in measured tones, "is coming home without fanfare, cameras, publicity people, fans, reporters or Hollywood columnists to bother him. He's going straight to the hospital by ambulance, and the first person who tries to get near him will have to remove my fingernails from around his throat. Do you understand that, Stanley?"

Witherspoon didn't look intimidated. "Sweetheart, if you're gonna be squeezin' anybody's tonsils, it'll be the boss', not mine."

Susan straightened. "What?"

"Who do you think planned the publicity around your gob's homecoming, anyway? Hey, honey, this was handed down from the top. Mr. Mayer knows the gold mine this publicity campaign will rake in. The war is popular, and everybody's all patriotic these days. Now I'm sorry that the poor slob, er—I'm sorry that your guy got himself all shot up, but you're in the wrong business if you think you can separate your private life from the public one, especially with something like this. It's time to go back to singin' in restaurants if that's what you have in mind!"

Susan was so angry that she couldn't speak. She turned sharply and plowed through technicians, actors, half-finished sets and movie crews, not caring who she jostled or pushed aside.

"Hey!" Witherspoon shouted after her. "If you're plannin' on meetin' your sailor's plane, Susie, baby, you better be back on this set in two days or that contract of yours is gonna be nothin' but a memory! I know the boss good enough to tell you that!"

Susan ignored him. But when she reached Louis Mayer's office she was told that he was out, and that the soonest she could see him would be in two weeks when he came back from his vacation in Mexico.

"Well then it works out splendidly, doesn't it?" Susan said from between clenched teeth. "I'll handle my own publicity while Mr. Mayer is out of town and save him all the trouble."

But her plans to reroute Mayer's extensive publicity around Joe's homecoming proved futile. Joe's plane couldn't be delayed and couldn't arrive early, she was told, because there were other crucial flight plans on either side of the clock that couldn't be altered. In addition, the landing field in Virginia was open to the public, including any reporters or photographers. There was no chance of the ambulance getting close enough to the plane for immediate unloading because of the logistics and layout of the landing strip.

The one thing the Navy did promise her was that because of Joe's condition, and because of her own celebrity status, they would arrange for crowd control at the gates—something they were glad to do as a show of appreciation for one of their own wounded.

Susan was grateful, since it appeared that one of Louis Mayer's publicity tactics had been to not provide her with any protection at all.

Another saving grace, Susan discovered, was that Joe wouldn't be aware of any of the hoopla that she knew would have embarrassed him. After hours of worrying the night before, she still hadn't been able to devise a way to tell him that he was about to become newsreel fodder. But to her relief, she was told that he'd been sedated for the four-day journey and wouldn't be revived until his admittance to a private room in the intensive care ward at the National Naval Hospital in Maryland.

Still, when she and Donald arrived at the landing strip in a chauffeured car, she was unprepared for the size of the crowd.

"Aunt Susie, I think there's gonna be a parade!" Donald exclaimed. "Do you think they're having a parade because Joe's home?"

"Not a parade, sweetheart," Susan said, then muttered beneath her breath, "A circus is more like it."

Donald bounced on his knees on the seat with excitement. "Wait 'til Joe sees how good I can read now! Wait 'til I show him my new book about ships! He can tell me what to do when I join the Navy, and then he can take me to the Navy yard and—"

Susan gently took his shoulders. "Donald, do you remember what we talked about? Joe needs to rest for a little while before we bother him too much."

"Oh sure, I remember!" Donald exclaimed.

Susan studied him with concern. She'd explained, without going into detail, that Joe would need rest until he started feeling better. Donald had seemed to understand at the time, but now Susan was uncertain.

"Joe said he'd take me to the Navy yard in San Francisco when he got home," Donald bubbled. "He said maybe they'd even let us go on a ship like the kind he was on."

"When did Joe promise you that?" Susan asked.

"In the letter he sent me, remember?" Donald answered.

"Donald," Susan protested, "that was before—"

"I know that was before Joe got shot," Donald interrupted. "But Joe'll get better and then we'll go to the Navy yard."

Susan nodded. "Maybe when Joe gets better," she said, and decided to leave it at that.

As the car approached the airstrip, a Naval officer standing near the gate motioned the driver through.

Flashbulbs went off as the car approached the plane.

Susan said a small prayer beneath her breath, took Donald's hand, and got out.

As she walked the short distance from the car to the plane, the press fired questions at her with machine-gun rapidity.

"Miss Abbott, how does it feel to have your boyfriend home again?"

"How does your fiancee feel about the death of his best friend, Miss Abbott? Does he resent you because of it?"

"What kind of therapy do they have planned, Miss Abbott?"

"Will you still work while he's recovering, Miss Abbott?"

"Miss Abbott, Miss Abbott, Miss Abbott—"

By the time she reached the cabin of the transport, Susan was breathless and shaken.

A handsome middle-aged Naval officer placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right, ma'am? That's quite a gantlet to have to run through!"

Susan took a moment to gather her wits before answering. "I'm fine," she said. "How is Mr. Brady?"

"As happy as any man can be who's spent four days dreaming," he smiled. He nodded reassuringly and stooped until he was at eye-level with Donald. "I guess you're pretty excited about your uncle coming home, huh?"

Donald's eyes sparkled. "He's not my uncle yet. When Joe and Aunt Susie get married, they're gonna 'dopt me. Then Aunt Susie will be my mother, and Joe will be my father!"

The officer chuckled. "Well, I'd say they're pretty lucky, then!"

"I'm gonna join the Navy someday," Donald said proudly.

"Is that right?" The officer smiled. "Well, I'll look for you, sailor. In the meantime, can you do something for me?"

"Sure!" Donald exclaimed.

"When you see your Uncle Joe, remember that he's not feeling very well right now. He's going to need you to be nice and quiet for a while, how does that sound?"

I already know that," Donald said, exasperated that people kept telling him the same thing.

"Okay," the officer said, standing. "As long as you understand, sailor." He gave Donald a grin, then motioned for Susan to follow.

They followed him down a corridor to the back of the plane where Joe laid unconscious, strapped to a gurney.

Susan breathed a sigh of relief. The last time she'd seen him had been only hours after the shooting. He had looked like death then, and, in fact, they had been unable at that time to assure her that he would survive.

Now he looked more himself, just asleep.

Two medics unclasped the restraints and carefully lifted him from the gurney to a stretcher. One of them handed Susan his dress hat.

Donald approached the stretcher slowly, carefully, and peered into Joe's face. "Hello, Joe."

Susan stooped. "He can't hear you, darling, he's asleep."

"I know," Donald answered. "I just wanted to say hello." He reached out and curled his fingers around Joe's hand. "Hello, Joe."

Susan felt a rush of gratitude for this special child who'd been left in her care. She embraced Donald, then stood. "Can you get him into the ambulance quickly?" she asked the officer. "There's an army of photographers and reporters out there, and I'd just as soon they get as little material for their publicity mills as possible."

"I don't think you'll have to worry too much about that," he answered. "Take a look."

The officer gave her a small grin as she peeked out the plane window and saw a small convoy of jeeps, military automobiles and other vehicles starting to surround the waiting ambulance like wagon trains in a circle.

Susan looked at him in surprise.

"When we found out who Mr. Brady was engaged to, we figured something like this might happen," the officer explained, "and we thought we'd show our respect for him by providing a little protection."

Susan shook her head. "How can I thank you?"

"No thanks necessary, ma'am." As the attendants lifted the stretcher the officer gave Joe a salute. "Welcome home, sailor," he said, then dropped his hand. "You've earned it."

Susan sat on a hard wooden folding chair beside Joe's bed, holding his hand, watching him sleep. It had been an hour since he'd been taken from the ambulance to his private room and still he showed no signs of waking.

Donald fidgeted on Susan's lap, trying to be good but unable to contain his impatience. "Isn't Joe *ever* gonna wake up, Aunt Susie?" he pleaded. "I could never, *ever* sleep so long!"

Susan was so caught up in her own thoughts that she barely heard him. "Be still now," she murmured, "and be very good."

Deeply troubled, Susan continued to gaze into her fiancee's sleeping face. Now that he was home she wondered how he would react to what had happened to him. Would the memories of war haunt him?

She knew he'd been in many deadly skirmishes and three major battles—two before she'd ever met him. If they were anything like the one she'd been caught up in—the one that had cost Clarence his life—she couldn't imagine ever living with it. She couldn't recall much of what had happened on the beach the day that Clarence had saved her, but what little she did remember was the foundation of her nightmares.

And Joe had to live with his war experiences—his injuries would be a constant reminder.

What could she possibly say to comfort and console him, she fretted. She didn't know him well enough to guess.

What do I know of him, really? she thought as she watched him sleep. *I know that he's handsome and bright. I know that he makes me feel the way no man ever has. I know that I love him. But I don't know the kind of words to say that will comfort him. I don't even know if he has other family who ought to know! What will I do? What will we do?*

Joe moaned softly and Susan sat up straight.

"He's wakin' up!" Donald exclaimed.

Susan lifted her nephew off of her lap and stood. "Donald, please remember—" she began.

"I know!" Donald said in exasperation.

Susan transferred herself from the chair to the edge of Joe's bed.

Joe moaned again. Involuntary tears escaped the corners of his closed eyes and trickled down the sides of his face.

Susan captured them on the edge of her fingers and leaned down to brush his lips with a light kiss. "Welcome home, darling," she whispered.

Joe tried to open his eyes, failed, and tried again. He grimaced against the sudden light and blinked in confusion.

"Welcome home, darling," Susan whispered again. "Oh, welcome home!"

"Miss Abbott, come in please." Doctor Ronald Leesburg opened the door to his office and ushered Susan inside, but stopped Donald at the door. "Son, wait out here in the hall. You can sit in that chair and talk to the nurse for a few minutes, all right?"

Donald's sigh indicated that he didn't think it was all right, but he nodded and did as he was asked.

Susan entered the surgeon's office, feeling uneasy and not sure what to expect. Shortly after Joe had awakened—still so groggy that he couldn't speak—she'd been taken by a nurse to Leesburg's office, though she would have preferred to stay with Joe.

The physician surprised Susan with his youth. *He can't be much older than Joe,* she thought. His face was pleasant, but uncompromising, as though, Susan thought, he practiced his smile to soften the hard edges of his professionalism.

He took a seat opposite her behind his desk. "Please sit down," he offered, extending a hand. "I've asked you here to give you the status on Mr. Brady's condition, and to tell you what you can expect in the future. I understand that you're his fiancee."

Susan nodded. "Yes, thank you. When the Department of the Navy called me after Joe had surgery on his lung, they said that it had gone very well."

"Well enough, given the circumstances," Leesburg answered. "He's also facing gastrointestinal surgery to repair damage from the bullet. But it's his back and shoulders that concern us most. His scapula—shoulder blades—have been damaged beyond repair. The erector muscles in the upper back and shoulders that would make it possible for him to stand straight no longer even exist. He is also receiving a potentially addictive drug for pain—morphine. We'll wean him off of that before it becomes an issue, but we want to do it gradually to give his system time to adapt. He's too weak for that now—we may attempt it after the final surgery on his back. Once off the drug, however, he'll never be completely free of pain. It's something he'll learn to live with."

Susan stared at him, too shocked to respond.

Leesburg gave her a sympathetic look. "This isn't what you expected to hear, is it?"

Susan stood, the disbelief and anxiety plain on her face. "You...you don't understand. Joe and I...Joe and I are going to be married."

Leesburg nodded. "You can still be married."

"But, how...how...what will we do? How will we manage? No one told me any of this. Why didn't anyone tell me!"

Leesburg stood and came out from behind his desk. "We weren't even sure that he would survive the flight home. There was no point in telling you until we were certain he was relatively free of danger. As for how he'll manage—Miss Abbott, your fiancee is a young man and the chances are that he'll live as long as anyone. Unlike most everyone else, however, he'll never again walk under his own power. At best, with an external brace and a surgically implanted internal support, he'll be able to sit upright in a wheelchair for one or two hours a day. Eventually, given time and therapy, he may be able to walk with crutches for short periods. His lower back and legs are in good condition, so there is an excellent possibility."

Susan realized that she was staring; a thousand protests went through her head, yet she was unable to speak.

"I'm sorry," Leesburg said. "I know you were expecting better news. There's something that I want you to consider and talk over with Mr. Brady. There are several excellent off-site medical facilities that cater to Navy veterans with severe injuries. Mr. Brady would receive round-the-clock medical attention and you would be able to visit him on a daily basis."

Susan gasped. "Are you suggesting that I leave my fiancee in a hospital?"

"That's what I'm suggesting," Leesburg nodded. "At least until his therapy is complete. If I understand correctly, you have a full-time career, and Mr. Brady will need constant attention for at least a year."

"Then I'll hire a nurse to come to our home to help take care of him."

"The expense would be—"

"Damn the expense! I make enough. I'll hire a staff of doctors if I have to! I'll hire a whole hospital, but I'm not leaving Joe in a hospital!" She took a deep breath in an effort to control her emotions. "Does he know all of this?"

Leesburg shook his head. "Not yet. He was drugged for pain when he was on the island and he wasn't cognizant enough to fully understand. We'll tell him when he regains full—"

"No," Susan sharply interrupted.

Leesburg lifted an eyebrow. "Miss Abbot, he has a right to know—"

"Of course," Susan answered, "but he'll accept it better from me. All I'm asking is that you give me a little time to find the right way, that's all."

Leesburg gazed at her uncertainly. "This isn't something that can wait. He has to be fully aware of what he's up against. To withhold the truth will only give him false hope. I've seen it happen to too many patients. I'll respect your request if you can assure me that you'll tell him soon."

Susan breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you. I have to leave day after tomorrow. I must be back in California by then—I'm under contract and have no choice. Will he be alert enough to understand before then?"

Leesburg frowned. "Not likely. He's been sedated for several days. In two days we'll be fortunate if he just knows his own name."

"Then I'll tell him when I speak to him by phone, or the next time I visit."

"When will your next visit *be*, Miss Abbott?"

"I'm afraid...I mean, I *can't* get back for at least a month, but—"

"No." Leesburg shook his head firmly. "No, I'm sorry. That's not good enough to—"

" But I'll *call*," Susan adamantly continued, refusing to be interrupted. "Please, Doctor, you don't understand what news like this will do to Joe! He's proud, independent! It can't come from a stranger. I'll tell him, but it *must* come from me!"

Susan's desperation swayed Leesburg against his better judgment. Slowly, reluctantly, he nodded.

"Thank you," Susan breathed when he finally nodded. "May I go to him?"

Leesburg opened his office door, disapproval evident even in his stance. "A nurse will escort you back to his room."

"Thank you," Susan said. "I promise that you won't regret your decision.

Susan was the most beautiful sight Joe had ever seen. He wanted to tell her so, wanted to scoop her up into his arms, hold her close and give her the kiss of her life.

But all he could do was stare helplessly up at her as she sat beside his bed, looking sad and beautiful, holding his hand, and talking to him in a soft, sweet voice.

He didn't understand what she was saying, but her voice was soothing and comforting.

He was vaguely aware that Donald was no longer in the room, and he supposed that they'd taken him somewhere to keep him from being upset, or to keep him from making too much noise. Joe's muddled mind wasn't certain, but he thought he'd appreciate some Donald kind of noise right now—something to distract him from his inability to act or think normally.

Lacking that escape, he opted for the next best thing and fell asleep. He slept through the night and into the next day.

When he awoke on the third day his head was clearer, but Susan wasn't beside his bed as she'd been every other time he'd opened his eyes.

"Whe...where—" he stammered to his nurse when she came in to adjust the heavy padding behind his back and check his IV. "Where is..."

"Miss Abbott left early this morning," the nurse explained. She gave him an encouraging smile. "She said to tell you that she had to get back to work but she'll call and that you shouldn't worry. She also said to tell you that she loves you, and that she thinks you look very sweet when you're asleep."

The nurse grinned at his look of embarrassment and chagrin. "It's nice to see you awake, Mr. Brady. Welcome home."

Joe blinked and glanced around at the small room that constituted "home." Four white walls without pictures or decorations, a white tiled ceiling and white sheets and blankets. Beside his bed there was a white metal table that held water in a white container, a clear glass and a radio. Thank God the radio was brown, Joe thought, or the room would disappear. "Home," he slurred around his thick tongue, "never looked like this."

The nurse smiled. "Better than a battleship crammed to the portholes with a thousand other guys, isn't it?"

Joe didn't think so, but he was too tired to answer.

"Don't worry," the nurse said as she turned to leave. "Miss Abbott will call in a few hours and the whole world will seem better to you."

But when they came two days later to prep him for intestinal surgery, Susan still hadn't called.

"Susan, meet your co-star, John Haverfield," the producer, Joe Pasternak, said. "John, this is Susan Abbott. Susan's the new kid on the block, but she acts like she's been doing this stuff her whole life!"

Susan blushed, smiled and took Haverfield's proffered hand.

Pasternak, in his traditional innocent and easy-going way, was introducing Haverfield to her as though he was a stranger. Though Susan had never met Haverfield in person, she, like everyone else who hadn't been living in a cave, knew very well who he was—one of the greatest dramatic screen actors in the world.

"It's a pleasure, Mr. Haverfield," Susan said, trying to keep the school girl stammer out of her voice. She realized that she was staring, but she couldn't help it. Haverfield, with his warm brown eyes, rakish pencil-thin moustache, and strong-jaw, had been her fantasy since she'd first seen him on the movie screen when she was a teenager.

She tried to sound mature and casual. "I've enjoyed your work very much."

Haverfield flashed a white-toothed grin.

Yes, Susan thought, her knees going just a little weak. It was the same smile she'd seen on the screen a dozen times as a member of the audience.

"I've enjoyed your work, too," Haverfield answered, shaking her hand.

Susan gave a surprised laugh. "There have only been two so far, and I haven't exactly had starring roles!"

"Well," Pasternak interrupted, "that's about to change, starting today!" He slapped Haverfield on the back, gave Susan a wink and a grin, and left to see to some impossible situation at the other end of the soundstage.

Susan was just about to embarrass herself by remarking that it was an honor and privilege to work with someone as justifiably renowned as Haverfield when she was, literally, saved by the bell.

"Susie, phone call from Maryland," the assistant director called.

Susan's face lit. "Are you telling me that I really have time to talk on the telephone?"

The assistant glanced at his watch. "You got five minutes, no more, so shake a leg."

"Excuse me," Susan apologized to Haverfield, but as she ran across the set, she'd already forgotten him.

Susan snatched up the phone receiver. "Yes, this is Susan Abbott."

Susan knew who the call was from before asking. She'd been awaiting news of Joe's surgery all day. Her guilt at not being able to call him had compounded her anxiety, but the grueling pre-shoot schedule had kept her from it during the day, and in the evenings she hadn't wanted to interrupt Joe's sleep.

"This is Susan Abbott," she repeated.

"Miss Abbott, this is Dr. Leesburg."

"Yes—"

"I hate to use old cliches, but I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we were able to repair most of the damage to Mr. Brady's digestive tract."

Susan breathed a small, silent prayer of thanks.

"As you know, he's scheduled for surgery on his back next month," Leesburg continued. "It's that surgery that I wish to discuss with you."

Susan held her breath.

"We have decided to concentrate on compensating rather than making futile attempts at healing."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that we will attempt to artificially replace the natural support that Mr. Brady has lost in his back and shoulders. To put it in layman's terms, we will surgically implant an internal brace. This will not, unfortunately, compensate enough for him to walk independently, but it will certainly give him more support to stand or sit upright than he would have otherwise."

Across the sound stage, Haverfield watched Susan. She was very beautiful, and it wasn't difficult for him to envision her alone with him in a more intimate setting. He was about to begin rehearsing his invitation to take her to dinner when he saw her shoulders sag. She put a hand to her forehead, and slowly sat on the edge of the stage. She looked close to tears.

She listened quietly a few moments, occasionally nodding, then she replaced the phone to the receiver. She continued to sit on the edge of the stage, gazing with unfocused eyes at nothing.

Haverfield approached slowly. "I hope I'm not intruding," he said as he stopped beside her, "but you look like you could use a listening ear right now."

Susan glanced up, too upset to be embarrassed. "No," she stammered. "No, thank you, but I'm...I'm fine."

Haverfield gave her a concerned look. "You don't *look* fine. I know it's none of my business, but—"

Susan shook her head and took his hand, allowing him to help her to her feet. "It's very kind of you, but it's...well, it's a personal matter. It's my fiancee."

Fiancee, he thought with disappointment. Well, that wasn't necessarily a disadvantage. He'd gotten around fiancees before.

"He was badly wounded in the war," Susan was saying, and he's been through so much already. They just called to tell me that he's come through his first surgery with flying colors. I should be ecstatic, but I..." She made a sound of distress. "Joe doesn't know that he won't be able to walk again, and it's up to me to tell him! But I don't...I don't know how."

Haverfield put a comforting arm around her shoulder. "Listen, you may not believe me right now, but I want to tell you something, and I don't want you to think I'm being frivolous or taking you lightly. I've had my share of troubles—who hasn't?—and I promise you that there's nothing like a good day's work to put things into perspective."

She glanced doubtfully up at him.

"You'll see!" he assured her. "By the end of the day, a lot of things will look clearer to you, I promise."

Susan sighed. "The only thing that's clear to me right now is that I want to be with Joe."

Haverfield grinned. "That's because you haven't started working yet!" He flashed his trademark grin and laid a hand against his chest. "I will personally see to it that you work so hard, madame, that you'll forget every trouble you've ever had...and then some!"

Susan had to laugh. He was so charming, and he was trying so hard to cheer her up. It was nice of him, she thought, to take such an interest in a total stranger.

Haverfield offered her his arm. "Shall we go and give our kindly director a hard time, Miss Abbott?"

Susan smiled and accepted his arm. "I suppose you'll teach me how to do that, too?" she teased.

"Oh, my dear," Haverfield devoutly answered. "Giving ulcers to directors is my very best talent!"

He led her onto the soundstage.

The first day of shooting was as exhausting as John Haverfield had promised it would be. Susan couldn't remember ever being so tired; the level of energy on the set was overwhelming. She wasn't completely unfamiliar with it—she'd already been a film extra for two years—but the difference between being just one of dozens in front of a camera and being one of the principals, was significant. All of the attention, energy, worry and expertise of everyone from the director to the script girl, was focused on her and Haverfield, and she found it exhausting.

Haverfield, however, was exhilarated. "Susan, you are without a doubt one of the most professional actresses I have ever worked with!" he enthused.

Susan laughed self-consciously and gave him a doubtful look. "Oh, really," she scoffed. She sat in the passenger seat beside him in his European imported, pre-war model car, parked at the privacy fence in front of her new home on Chester Drive in Los Angeles.

In her imaginings of what being a celebrity would be like, she had never thought it would be this easy for a man like John Haverfield to drive her home without reporters and photographers following, or a dozen autograph seekers lurking in the bushes.

But here they were, with not even one fan or scoop reporter in sight.

Him! she thought, gazing at him with the same awe that she had felt all day. *This man!* Not only was he one of the most famous actors in the world, but he was also one of the most handsome and dashing. And here he was, looking at her out of two of the most beautiful brown eyes she'd ever seen, and complimenting her!

"Well, it's very nice of you to say so," she blushed, "but I've got a long way to go. This is only my third movie and my first starring role, so I—"

Haverfield set his jaw and shook his head. "Third film or not, you know your business and you're good at it. You put yourself across, Susan. You sell yourself and you do it with style. This film's going to be a major hit, and then I promise you that your life will never be the same again. If you thought life was hectic before, just wait."

Susan sighed. "I can't say I'm looking forward to that. There are some times I look back at my quiet little life on Foothill Drive and—"

"Wait," Haverfield interrupted. He held up a hand to stop her and glanced around. "Listen, do you mind if I come inside for a few minutes? I think it would be safer for us to talk inside than out here where we might become gossip columnist fodder at any moment."

"Oh, of course!" Susan exclaimed. "How silly of me not to think of it first!" She grinned shyly. "You see? this is all still very new to me."

Donald's live-in nanny, Edith, was still awake when Susan and Haverfield entered. Susan was disappointed that Edith didn't seem excited to meet Haverfield until she remembered that Edith had come recommended to her by June Allyson, the star of her last picture. Edith was an old pro at meeting, greeting, and being introduced to famous people.

"Donald's asleep...finally," Edith said with a tired sigh.

Susan looked at her uncertainly. "I'm afraid to ask what finally means."

"It means he doesn't like the way I sing," Edith answered, "and he refuses to go to bed without a lullaby."

"That's my fault," Susan groaned. "I've created a monster." She laid a hand on Edith's shoulder. "I promise you that I'll talk to him about that tomorrow. I guess it's time for my baby to grow up a little bit and put himself to sleep the way everyone else does, huh?"

Edith nodded firmly. "Thank you! Good night, Miss Abbott. Nice to meet you, Mr. Haverfield."

When Edith was gone, Haverfield gave Susan a curious look. "I didn't know you had a child."

"Oh, Donald isn't mine...yet," she explained. "He was my sister's son. My sister died shortly after he was born, and Donald's father was killed in the war. I'm really the only relative that he can depend upon for support. When Joe and I are married we're going to adopt him, though. He's a wonderful child." She thought a moment. "A little strong-willed at times, but wonderful."

"He sounds terrific," Haverfield said. "I'd like to meet him."

Susan gave him a coy smile. "Have you ever been in the Navy?"

Haverfield looked mystified, then shook his head. "No, why?"

"Well, that's too bad, because that's the one thing that would make you an instant hit with Donald! He's mad about the Navy and anything that has to do with it! John, I know it's late and you'd probably like nothing more than to just get home, but may I offer you a cup of coffee?"

Haverfield grinned. "Actually a glass of wine sounds better right now, if you have it. It's been a long day, hasn't it?"

"The longest I can ever remember!" Susan agreed. "And this was just the first day! I have a little red wine, I think. Nothing expensive or sophisticated—"

"It'll do, thanks."

Susan nodded. "Then I'll be right back."

When Susan left, Haverfield gave himself a walking tour of the living room. It was obvious that Susan was still new to fame and celebrity. As beautifully as the room was decorated, it lacked the opulent, expensive touches that he'd come to expect from the homes of his wealthy friends. Her home was large, but its trappings were middle-class suburbia, right down to the photographs on the walls.

Haverfield glanced up at the large portrait above the piano of a handsome middle-aged man in a formal Navy uniform and wondered if he was her Joe. He decided against it when he saw the small grouping of photos on the piano top of herself and a smiling, happy-looking young man in casual Navy blues.

The photos weren't sophisticated—they were the kind taken in drug store quick photo booths. He picked one of them up and studied his competition.

Joe was good looking with a smile that could have put him on the stage or in the movies, and he had a cocksure belief in himself that came through even in a dime store photo.

That he and Susan were in love was obvious from the way that they looked at one another.

He replaced the photograph and picked up another. This one was of a shy looking young man in a Navy dress uniform. The kid looked like he belonged in an elementary school rather than the military. This photograph, in sharp contrast to the others, was a professional portrait.

"That's Clarence," Susan's voice behind him said.

Haverfield jumped in surprise and nearly dropped the picture. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you!" he exclaimed, replacing the photo on the piano top.

Susan smiled and handed him a wine glass. "Clarence was a good friend of my fiancee...and of mine, too. He died in the same battle that Joe was wounded in. Clarence saved my life." She picked up the portrait and smiled, running a finger across the brim of Clarence's sharp looking dress hat. "His fiancee Pam sent a copy of this to me. I'd asked for a picture and I expected something small. Getting this was a real treasure. Clarence had it taken last year as a Christmas gift for his mother."

"And his fiancee gave it to you?" Haverfield asked in surprise.

Susan replaced the portrait. "No, this is an extra. I thought it was very kind of Pam to send it, especially since I'm the reason that...well, it doesn't matter. Clarence was a very special young man." She smiled at the photo. "Very kind." Susan sighed. "John, I really must apologize. It's later than I realized and I'm much more tired than I thought. I don't mean to be rude, but I wonder if we might cut this evening short? I'll never make it to the studio in the morning if I don't get some sleep soon, and I still have to call the hospital."

Haverfield blinked in surprise. He couldn't count the times on one hand that he'd been asked to leave a beautiful young woman's home for any reason. When he recovered, he smiled, handed her back the glass of wine, and bowed from the waist. "Of course, and I apologize. It *is* late, isn't it?"

Susan nodded gratefully. "I'll walk you to your car."

Haverfield cupped her chin in his hand and tilted her face to brush her lips with a friendly kiss. "Don't bother, I know the way. You get some rest, and I'll see you on the set bright and early, how's that?"

Susan groaned. "Too bright and too early!"

Haverfield laughed. "That's show biz!"

He blew her a kiss at the door and was gone.

Susan blew the air out of her cheeks and collapsed on the sofa. Haverfield, with his handsome face, elegant manners, fame, fortune, and sophistication occupied her thoughts for a grand total of three seconds before she concentrated on more important things.

She turned on a small overhead, picked up the phone receiver, and dialed. It was late, but her conscience wouldn't allow her to go another hour without calling Joe.

The phone rang twice before it was answered.

"National Naval Hospital."

"Good evening," Susan said. "This is Susan Abbott. If Mr. Brady is awake, may I speak to him?"

There was a hesitation on the other end, then a chuckle. "Miss Abbott, we were hoping you'd call soon. Mr. Brady isn't in the best of moods, and if the cussing we heard from his room a few minutes ago is any clue, he's certainly awake! He'll be glad to hear from you. If you'll wait a moment, I'll have the switchboard put your call through to his room. Just one word of warning—you remember that when you were here he couldn't stay awake because of the sedative?"

"Yes. Poor Joe."

"Well...he's awake this time, and how! Feeling no pain, ma'am, and too full of energy for his own good."

Susan sighed. "Which drug is it this time?"

"You couldn't pronounce it. But I can't, either, so don't feel badly! Hang on just one moment and I'll let the switchboard know you're calling."

Not in the best of moods, Susan thought, imagining how impatient Joe must be. Dr. Leesburg had said that, despite the fact that Joe had just had surgery that morning, he was already threatening to crawl out of the room on his hands and knees if someone didn't do something to liven up the joint.

"Boredom," Leesburg had sighed. "One of the major drawbacks of being twenty-five years old and stuck in the hospital."

Susan's musing were interrupted by a click on the other end of the receiver.

"Susie, baby, is that you?" Joe eagerly asked.

Susan's spirits soared. He sounded like himself again! "Oh Joe, darling! Joe, you sound wonderful!"

"Oh baby, I was beginning to think I'd dreamed you up!" Joe exclaimed. "I can just see you, honey, I can just see you!"

She laughed. "How are you feeling, darling? Dr. Leesburg says you came through it all very well."

"Yeah, I guess, if you call having your guts ripped open and shuffled like a deck of cards, I guess I came through it all right."

"You poet, you! You always did have a way with words."

He laughed. "Honey, I miss you so bad."

"Are you in any pain?" she asked.

"Nah. They keep the pharmacy stocked in here pretty good, so I don't feel much. Worse thing is I'm going stir bugs. There's nothin' to do here, except read and listen to the radio."

"Filming should be over in about a month, and Donald and I will take the first flight to Washington."

"Baby," Joe emphatically answered, "I might not be able to walk yet, but I'd be willing to lay bets that in a month I'll be climbin' the walls!" He hesitated. "Wait, that wasn't fair. It just slipped out. I didn't mean to make you feel guilty."

"I know you didn't," Susan assured him. "And I know how you feel. I wish I could be there sooner, but—"

"Don't apologize, I understand, really I do. I didn't mean to make it sound like—"

"I know."

"You wait 'til I'm back on my feet again, you'll never hear me gripe again."

He's giving you the perfect opening! Susan thought. *Tell him about his condition. Tell him now!*

But she couldn't.

"How's the kid?" Joe asked.

"K..kid?" she stammered. "Donald, you mean?"

"Who else? How is he?"

"Well he...his teacher called me at home last night to say that she's worried that he...wait, how did she put it? Oh yes. Donald is beginning to create fabrications on a grand scale."

"Which means what?"

"That he's lying."

"What!"

"Only that's not how Donald sees it. He's just bragging...about you! Of course by the time he finishes telling his stories, you've been promoted to Admiral, awarded an entire fleet of your own because you're the best sailor on the seven seas, and you single-handedly wiped out a sky full of enemy pilots with one hand tied behind your back."

There was a moment's pause on the other end. "So where does the lying part come in?" Joe asked.

Susan giggled. "Honestly, Joe, you're as bad as he is! It's no wonder the two of you get along so well!"

"Give him a sock on the arm for me."

"I will."

Joe sighed. "Honey, I want my arms

around you so bad." He paused. "I don't wanna scare you...not after the dumb thing I did on the ship, but sweetheart, I just wanna hold you."

"Oh Joe," she said softly. "What happened on the ship was a misunderstanding. Now I wish that we had...well, I wish that I hadn't been so foolish."

"You weren't foolish," he said. "But what I did was really stupid." His voice lightened a little. "But, baby, you gotta give me a break from time to time. I'm not used to dealing with a classy dame like you!"

She laughed softly. "You'd better get some rest, sweetheart."

"Aunt Susie, all I do is rest."

"Would it help if I sent you some books and magazines?"

He snorted. "I've already read everything ever printed since God created Adam. Even the war news is beginning to get boring. Ahh, ignore me, I'm feeling sorry for myself."

"Well, you haven't long to wait until we're there. Just a few weeks."

"Then what?" he asked. "How long can you stay?"

"I haven't received word of another script yet," she answered, "but I suspect something's in the works. The studio is hard at work on this silly publicity angle of me as the noble fiancee of one of our brave, wounded veterans."

"Yeah, I know. Reporters and people like that keep callin' here, but the hospital won't let the calls through."

"Good. Darling, when the last surgery is over..."

"It's not gonna be easy," Joe interrupted.

"I know, but..but together we'll see it through. Joe, there's something I have to tell you—"

"It'll take a few months for me to really recover," Joe interrupted again. "After that, I want to start working on a game plan. I want to be back on my feet and dancing again by the end of next year. That gives me a full year. I used to rehearse ten, sometimes twelve hours a day. And it might be even longer than that since I'm comin' back from a standstill. I gotta find a studio somewhere close by, or maybe we can turn that spare room in the house on Foothill Drive into a rehearsal room."

Susan's breath caught in her throat; though she tried, she couldn't speak.

"Susie?" he asked. "Hey, Susie, you still there?"

"I'm here, Joe," she said quietly.

"Thought I scared you off! All right, so I'm a working stiff, I admit it, but don't worry, I won't work so hard that I forget family."

"No, darling, of course not. But, that's something that we can talk about when I see you in a month."

"Oh sure. Say, listen, if you've got other plans for that back room, it's okay by me. I'll find another place, no problem."

"You've got too much ambition for your own good, Mr. Brady. I want you to get some sleep now. Good night, sweetheart. I love you."

"I love you, too, baby. Hey, hug the kid for me."

"I will."

Slowly, she replaced the receiver in its cradle.

Joe scowled at the book in his hands, hating it—first because it was boring (everything was boring), second because he didn't have the strength to throw it and watch it hit the wall, and third because he'd once loved reading but after days with nothing to do but peruse stacks of magazines, books, dime novels, trade journals, funny papers, newspapers, and any thing else in the western world in print, he'd learned to despise reading.

Unable to hurl the book, he dropped it instead, but the meek little thud it made on the wooden floor did nothing to satisfy his lust for a good, violent crash.

"I'm not readin' one more word, do you hear me!" he shouted—or tried to shout, but he couldn't pull enough oxygen into his bad lung to even make his intended bellow effective. He settled for uttering the foulest curse he could think of, then repeated it a little louder for good measure.

A nurse, wandering by, stuck her head in the door, *tsked*, and kept going.

"Yeah, sure, easy for you to say," Joe scowled. With a sigh, he laid his head against the pillows, set his mouth in a firm line of disgust, and stared at the ceiling, counting the tiles for the millionth time.

He was just about to declare a modern miracle, throw himself out of bed, and force himself up on his feet, when the same nurse who'd tsked at his foul mouth, put her head in again. "You up to a visitor?" she asked.

He lifted his head hopefully. "My fiancee?"

"Nope—another lady who says she knows you. We thought she might be another journalist trying to get through with the 'Hey, I'm an old friend of Brady's' routine."

"How do you know she's not?" Joe asked.

"I don't. But she told us to tell you that she's from Brooklyn and that she used to know a friend of yours by the name of Clarence. Ring any bells?"

Joe felt as though he'd been doused with cold water. He stared at the nurse for so long, unable to answer, that she took it as a refusal.

"Okay, I'll send her away. I thought that as grumpy as you've been that even a reporter might be a welcome diversion—"

She turned to leave.

"Did she say that her name was Pam?" Joe called after her.

The nurse turned at the door. "Yes, that's the name. Want me to send her in?"

"Yeah," Joe said. His voice sounded hoarse and unnatural to his own ears. "Send her in."

Joe felt cold and hot at the same time—the way he always felt when he was panicked. He stared at the door, waiting for Clarence's lady, wondering what he was going to say to her. Why was she here? Did she blame him for not keeping Clarence safe? He blamed himself. If he hadn't been sulking in the safety of the ship when the attack on the beach started, it would've been he who'd died saving Susan's life, not Clarence, who had his own lady to live for and return home to.

But when Pam finally peered uncertainly into the room, and gave him a shy, sweet smile, his fears evaporated.

Pam was so much like Clarence that Joe was surprised he hadn't noticed it before. Like Clarence, Pam was attractive in a homely way. She had large blue eyes that reflected every emotion...like Clarence. And her smile was childlike, yet wise in a way he couldn't define...just like Clarence.

Joe's throat constricted the moment he saw her, but he latched onto his emotions, clamped down as hard as he could, and spared her—and himself.

There was still enough grief in her own expressive eyes to prove that more than six weeks after Clarence's death, she hadn't reconciled herself to it.

And that, he realized, *is why she's here.*

"Hello, Joe," she said in that same shy way that Clarence had once had. "I hope I'm not botherin' ya. You probably don't even remember me, but—"

"Whataya mean, not remember you!" Joe protested. "You're Pam! You're Clarence's girl! Sure I remember you! Come in, don't stand there like a stranger! Come in and sit down."

The nurse nodded, satisfied that Joe did, indeed, know his visitor, and left.

Pam entered the room slowly, uncertainly. She smiled as she pulled up a chair and sat beside Joe's bed. "That uh...that don't look real comfortable," she said, indicating the brace that supported his upper back, and the mounds of padding behind him.

"It's not so bad," Joe answered. "They keep pumping this drugstore into me so I don't feel much of anything...not even good things!"

Pam nodded, and he wondered how much small talk she was going to make before she got to the point. Obviously, he discovered, at least a little more.

"I guess you ain't been outside for a while," she said. "It's really hot for this time of year. Unseasonable, the man on the radio said."

"You're a couple hundred miles from Brooklyn, too. Weather's different out here, huh?"

"Yeah," she agreed, and smiled uncertainly. "I'm sorry you got hurt so bad. I felt terrible when I found out. I mean, between you and Clarence, I figured one o' ya shoulda made it out safe, y'know."

Joe winced.

She looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. "I um...I'm not gonna stay long. I came by to give you something, 'cause I thought you might like it, then I'll go."

"Maybe I don't want you to go," he lied. "Maybe I'd like you to stay a while and visit and talk and...remember a little. Maybe I'd like that."

A smile fluttered briefly at her the ends of her mouth. "I think we both probably do too much rememberin'. I'm tryin' real hard to find ways not to remember anymore."

"Bein' here probably isn't the best way," he suggested.

She snorted softly. "Ain't it the truth. And that's why, if you don't mind, I'm gonna just do what I came to do, and then I'm gonna leave." She stood. "One of these days, if you feel up to it, and it's okay, I want to sit down 'cross a table somewhere with you and we'll talk our heads off. But right now it's still so fresh and new. All I gotta do is close my eyes, and there he is, standin' in front of me, looking so handsome, and I just—" she gasped and closed her eyes.

Please go, Joe thought. *Please do*

whatever you came here to do, and go. You're not the only one that still feels it fresh and new.

Pam recovered quickly, wiped a gloved hand across her eyes and opened her purse. "I thought to myself at the funeral that Joe oughta have something that belonged to Clarence," she said. "If I hadn't been so upset, I mighta thought to give this to Susie, but I didn't." She extracted something from her purse and held it out to him.

It wasn't until she laid it in his hand that Joe realized that she was giving him Clarence's Silver Star.

He looked at her sharply, startled. "I can't take this," he breathed in astonishment.

She reached out and curled his fingers around the medal. "You gotta. I want you to."

He stared at her another long moment, then shook his head. "No. No, this is yours, or Clarence's mother's, or it belongs to his sisters."

Pam shook her head. "Clarence wouldn'ta got that if you hadn't saved his life the day he got blown overboard. He told me that story three times, he musta." She shook her head. "Me and his family—we're proud of him for gettin' that medal. We're so proud I think we could bust. But we talked about it, all of us did, and they thought you ought to have it, too."

Joe glanced down at the medal, still astonished. "Why?" he finally asked. "Why this?"

"Because," Pam answered, "We knew that we coulda give ya somethin' that mighta meant somethin' to Clarence, personal, but it wouldn'ta meant nothin' to you. This is somethin' that you two shared together." She stood again, shaking her head firmly as he began again to protest. "We talked about it all night. Clarence wrote his folks about you all the time, and they're really glad you were such a good friend to him. We thought really hard about what to give you, and this is what we came up with."

She leaned forward to kiss his cheek.

Joe put his hands at either side of her face, and gave her a full, generous kiss. "That's from Clarence," he whispered. Then he turned her face to gently kiss her cheek. "And that's from me." He looked down again at the medal.

When he glanced up, Pam was already at the door. She turned briefly. "I'm sorry I did this so quick, and I'm sorry I can't stay and talk 'cause I'd like to, but this is real hard for me. I hope you get better, Joe."

Then she was gone.

Drowning in fresh grief and renewed memories, Joe wished that it was five minutes earlier, and that he was merely bored again.

Joe laid in the darkness for hours, unable to sleep after Pam's visit. He'd fooled himself into believing that he was finally getting used to the idea of Clarence's death, but Pam had brought it all back...how had she put it? Fresh and new.

He glanced at Clarence's Silver Star, still in his hand. He could just make out its edges, glinting reflected light from a lamp outside the window. He turned the medal between his fingers. "This is what it comes down to, buddy," he said bitterly. "A short life, a quick funeral, and this piece of tin is all that's left to remind anybody you were here." He wiped his wet face with the back of his hand. "Well, I won't forget, Brooklyn."

But the words rang hollow, even to his own ears. It wasn't good enough that a few people knew who and what Clarence had been.

The press had it all wrong, he thought. They were practically breaking down the doors to the hospital, trying to get interviews with him, when he wasn't even the important one. Susan was alive because of Clarence. And yet, aside from Brooklyn's funeral, the press had pretty much ignored him.

Yeah, it was a nifty sacrifice, but let's talk to the sap in the hospital who's gonna marry Susan Abbott, Joe thought resentfully. *Who cares about the guy who saved her life? A dead man can't give interviews.*

If that was what it was all about, then Joe was sorry that Susan was getting so famous. Real life didn't matter to people like that. Real sacrifices didn't count. Unless people read it in a book or saw it up on a movie screen, it didn't seem to matter to anybody.

He hesitated, his eyes glinting with sudden inspiration. But when the thought finally crystallized, he shook his head and made a sound of disgust. "Who'd read it?" he said aloud. "Who'd care? A hundred guys die every day in this damned war. What's the life of one scrawny little sailor gonna mean to anybody?" But he couldn't dismiss his idea.

Finally, when his wakefulness had become more a product of inspiration than grief, he pressed the call button and summoned his nurse.

She wasn't one of his favorite people, and the feeling was mutual. She reminded him of his first commanding officer, whom he'd despised, and he reminded her of her surly first husband, whom she'd despised even more.

Reluctantly, she answered his summons and turned on a dim room light as she entered. "It's two o'clock in the morning," she said. "Are you still awake?"

He made an impatient face. "Nah, I'm talkin' in my sleep."

She sighed. She hated getting the night shift and she hated getting this patient. "What do you want?"

"A pen and pad of paper."

She lifted an eyebrow but didn't answer.

"A...pen...and...pad...of...paper," Joe repeated, enunciating each word as though talking to a slow child. "You think you can handle that, or do you need me to spell it out in Navy code?"

She smirked. "Anybody ever tell you that you are not a nice man, Mr. Brady?"

He was in no mood. "You try layin' here every day with nothin' to do but watch dust pile up and tell me how good a mood you stay in, sister."

She rolled her eyes, turned and left.

As he waited, Joe's irritation began to turn into eagerness. He turned his plan over and over in his head. By the time the nurse returned with the pen and paper, he felt good enough to apologize.

"Don't bother," the nurse sniffed. "You're just the type, that's all. Just the type."

Joe scowled, but he had no time to waste on her. Not if he wanted to keep his inspiration, and he was beginning to think this was the best idea he'd ever had. He tilted the fountain pen at an angle to get a good flow of ink and began to write.

"What are you doing, anyway?" she demanded. "Nobody writes this time of night."

He glanced up and gave her a heartsick look. "I'm writing you a love letter, Attila. I've been meaning to tell you, I can't live without you."

"Then drop dead," she recommended, and left.

He didn't even mind her getting the last word this time. He had better things to do. He began to write.

You know, Clarence, I think it's awful us goin' ashore and leavin' these guys sittin' around here in their undershirts, and we gotta go meet those beautiful dames in their soft silk dresses, he wrote, laughing softly at the memory.

Yeah, but duty is duty, and an order is an order, Clarence said, and as Joe wrote, he could hear Clarence's New York accent.

Y'know, I know some guys would get a thrill out of meeting a gorgeous gal every night...

Joe chuckled again, his pen barely able to keep up with his thoughts.

By seven a.m., and the arrival of his physician, the bed and floor were littered with paper.

"What are you up to?" Leesburg asked in surprise. "Did a litter basket blow up in here?"

Joe grinned. "I'm writin' a masterpiece."

The physician raised an eyebrow and sat on the edge of the bed. "Well, I'm glad to see you've found something to occupy your time, anyway. I was beginning to think about hiring bodyguards to protect you from the staff."

"This ain't just something, Doc," Joe said. "This is history. This is gonna make people sit up and take notice. This is gonna make Clarence famous."

Joe couldn't write fast enough. When, after three days, he finally scribbled "The End" on his hastily transcribed manuscript, he immediately began to revise.

"Is that Brady in there chuckling to himself?" Atilla the nurse asked in amazement.

"Scary, isn't it?" another staffer answered. "He even said good morning to me."

Attila raised her eyebrows. "And I thought he only knew how to cuss."

Joe felt good about his working draft. He had feared that writing about Clarence, and the shore leave in which they'd met Susan and Pam, would depress him. Instead, he found that it was helping to lift the crushing grief he'd felt since Clarence's death. He set to work again, rewriting it a third time, as neatly as he could, with the intention of asking Susan to show it to one of her bosses. Even if they didn't accept it as a script, he hoped they'd take the idea—as long as they stayed true to what had really happened.

"It's a good thing you're on painkillers, or you'd have writer's cramp to beat the band," his daytime nurse commented as she brought in his breakfast.

Joe grinned.

She grinned back. "Ah, now there's an improvement! You know, you're almost good-looking when you smile." She lifted the tray above his bed into place and positioned him carefully into an upright position. "Too bad you didn't try it sooner."

Joe ignored the remark. He was getting tired of trying to explain that if he was in a bad mood it was only because he'd spent three years watching friends die in a bloody war, that he'd lost his best friend to a violent death, and that he spent twenty-four hours a day staring at ceiling tiles.

People didn't understand things like that. They told him to get over it, be glad he was alive, and stop inflicting his bad humor on people.

But he wasn't in a bad humor today. "Say, when are you going to give me something that I can sink my teeth into?" he asked, eyeing the strained broth that masqueraded as his every meal.

"When that mish-mosh you call a digestive tract starts to look a little happier," she answered.

He sighed ruefully, but he honestly never felt hungry. So far he'd spent six weeks on IVs that fed him all the necessary nutrients, and even the chicken broth was nothing more than a courtesy. But he hated to think what he must look like.

"How much do you think I weigh?" he asked.

"We can find out," she answered.

"No, just guess."

She eyed him critically. "About a hundred and fifteen, I'd bet."

Joe yelped. "Clarence weighed more than that!"

She gave him a curious look. "That's the fourth time I've heard you mention that name in two days. Who's Clarence? A friend of yours?"

"Was," Joe said.

She nodded. "War buddy?"

"Something like that."

She shrugged, nodded, and turned to leave. At the door she turned and looked back. "Oh, I almost forgot. Yesterday you asked me to track down a friend for you—"

"Chevenmon."

"Right. I finally got through to him. Okay if he drops in to see you this morning? He said ten o'clock was the only time he had open."

Joe snorted. "Nice of him to make time. Yeah, ten o'clock's great."

The nurse nodded. "Will do. Keep smilin', Sailor—it looks good on you."

Joe spent the remainder of the morning copying the manuscript into the notebook, using his most legible hand. By the time Jacques Chevenmon arrived, he was more than a third finished.

"Joseph, I don't recognize you!" Joe's French-born dance mentor wailed as he took a seat beside Joe's bed. He grasped Joe's hand at the wrist and held it aloft to demonstrate. "You look like the leftovers of someone's chicken dinner!"

His accent was thick, despite more than forty years in America—a fact Joe had often wondered about. He suspected that Jack Chevenmon used the accent to hook dames. Worked, too. Joe had even tried it himself once, but his Parisian accent sounded more like it originated from the heart of Pittsburgh, and it never worked.

Joe regarded his friend unhappily. "Yeah, it's real nice to see you after all this time, too, Jack."

Chevenmon tsked disdainfully and shook his head. "When you left the troupe to join the Navy, I told you then that you were demented. This proves I was right. You will listen to me next time, yes?"

"I will listen to you next time...maybe," Joe grinned. "Anyway, don't worry. The Navy doesn't want me anymore."

"No one necessarily wants you," Chevenmon said. "You just work your way into people's lives, wreck havoc, then leave just when they discover that you've become indispensable to them." The Frenchman groaned. "The troupe hasn't been the same. They ask for you in every city we play."

"Who, they?" Joe asked.

Chevenmon shrugged grandly. "The newspapers, the dance journalists!"

"And you're lyin through your teeth, Frenchie," Joe answered. "'Cause every reporter in the entire country, and then some, knows exactly where I am." He gave his mentor a disgruntled look. "Either you just haven't been readin' the papers lately, Jack, or you're livin' in a cave."

Chevenmon laughed. "Oh, I know. I even saw you in a newsreel in the movies."

Joe's eyes widened. "What! I hadn't heard about that!"

"Well, not you, really. A photograph of you. The reporter very dramatically gave an account of your adventures in the southern part of the Pacific."

"The South Pacific, Jack."

"And said you were going to marry a very pretty movie star." Chevenmon looked at him doubtfully. "You're still going to marry a very pretty movie star, even looking like this?"

Joe screwed his face up in frustration. "If you don't stop with all these flowery compliments, my ego's never gonna stand it. What's with you, anyway? You never heard of lying to make somebody feel good?"

Chevenmon laughed, then adopted a serious expression. "The French never lie."

"And the moon is made out of swiss cheese," Joe smirked.

Chevenmon settled back in his chair and gave Joe's arm an affectionate pat. "It is good to see you alive, Joseph. How is that for a compliment?"

"Lame as hell. You know why I asked you here?"

Chevenmon shook his head. "I haven't a clue. To make me feel handsome by comparison, perhaps?"

"Yeah, well, besides that. Why else would I ask you to come? I want to talk to you about training, Jack. When I get outta here, it's gonna be hell to get back in shape, and I need your help."

Chevenmon blinked. "Need my help...for what?"

"Like I said, gettin' back in shape. It's gonna be a while yet—a year, even, maybe—but I want you to give me a drill...a routine that'll help build up the muscles, especially in my back and shoulders. I got crushed when a cannon on deck came loose—busted up my back and shoulders pretty bad, so those're the areas to concentrate on most in the beginning."

Chevenmon regarded him seriously a moment, then he leaned forward, bracing his elbow on his knee and his fist beneath his chin. "You've spoken to your doctors about this, yes?"

"Why bother? You think they're gonna tell me I'll be able to dance again some day?" He snorted. "That's not their job. Their job is to set me up for the worst so that if the best does happen it'll be a nice surprise. Well, I don't need surprises, Jack, and I don't want 'em. I'm gonna dance again, and I'm gonna do it in a year or sooner. And I want you to get the routines mapped out for me, you got that?"

Chevenmon continued to stare at him, then he sighed. "I'll see what I can do." He stood and leaned down to give his apprentice an embrace, then stopped.

"Don't worry," Joe assured him. "Trust me, I don't feel a thing."

Chevenmon straightened and took Joe's hand. "All the same, I'll not take the chance. I'm glad to see you, my friend. I have other business this morning, but we'll talk again soon."

Joe was startled. "What, already? You just got here."

"No, no I have another appointment, Joe. Another time. Goodbye and get well."

Watching his mentor beat a hasty retreat to the door—the same man who'd discovered him at the age of twelve in a local talent show, and who'd trained him to terpsichorean perfection—Joe had the disturbing feeling that Jack couldn't get out fast enough. He swallowed hard. Maybe he'd been wrong to contact Jack now. He knew he looked like hell. What if Jack didn't want him back? What if Jack had no intention of helping him get back into shape?

Jacques Chevenmon gently tapped his hand on the station desk to attract the nurse's attention, then smiled as she responded. "Bonjour, Mademoiselle," he greeted her with a little bow. "I wonder, how possible would it be to speak with Monsieur Brady's physician?"

"Easy enough to find out," she answered. She lifted the phone receiver. A moment later she smiled and returned the receiver to its hook. "He has a few minutes now if you'd like."

"I'd like very much, thank you."

As the nurse led him down the corridor she gave him a curious look. "You're a friend of Brady's?"

"Since he was a very young man," Chevenmon acknowledged.

"But you're so...and he's so..."

Chevenmon chuckled. "He has always been 'so'...but that is part of his charm. Most women have always found that his being 'so' is most attractive."

The nurse shook her head. "I don't see it. Grouchy is grouchy no matter which way you slice it." She paused in front of a door and knocked.

A moment later Chevenmon was escorted into the physician's office.

"Allow me to first thank you for saving my friend's life," Chevenmon said as he took a seat.

The doctor raised his eyebrows. "Much as I'd like to take credit for that, that particular miracle is attributable to some very gifted surgeons in the South Pacific."

"Ah, yes, the South Pacific," Chevenmon nodded. "That is precisely about which I wish to speak with you. Young Joseph and the South Pacific." He thought carefully a moment, choosing his words. "You may not know, but Joseph Brady is a great dancer. An artist. I have had the privilege to count myself among his teachers, but he surpassed even me. He surpassed all of us."

The physician nodded. "Yes, I know that Mr. Brady was a dancer."

"Do you also know that he wishes to dance again?"

"Yes, I know that, too."

"And what have you told him?"

The doctor sighed. "I haven't told him anything...yet. But when his fiancee arrives in a few weeks, it will be our unfortunate task to inform Mr. Brady that without surgery he'll never get out of bed again. With it, he may walk again with crutches, but he'll still spend most of his time in a wheelchair. And I am very sorry to give you such bad news about your friend."

Jacques Chevenmon sat in silence a moment, then he gave a slight smile, nodded, and extended his hand to the physician as he stood. "I resigned myself to losing my star performer the day he joined the military. Idealistic. You may not think so to hear him talk at times, but the boy has an immense storehouse of foolish idealism. There are many dancers in the world. Not many as gifted as Joe, but they do exist. It is my job to find them, and I will. In the meantime, thank you most graciously, sir for your time."

The physician shook his head as the door closed behind Chevenmon. He sat slowly in the chair behind his desk. "With friends like that, Mr. Brady," he murmured, "you don't need enemies."

"You've got some color back in your cheeks," Pam said as she took a seat in a folding chair beside Joe's bed. "You must be feelin' better, 'cause you don't look so gray anymore, y'know?" She set her oversized cloth shopping bag on the floor beside the chair, smiled her Clarence-like smile, and folded her hands in her lap.

Joe couldn't help grinning. It was still too soon after Clarence's death for him to feel happy about her company, but he figured he owed it to Clarence to entertain her...and she *was* kinda cute.

"What's so funny?" Pam challenged, pouting just enough to remind him of Susan.

"You are," he admitted. "You talk funny, just like somebody else I used to know."

She saddened at his reference to Clarence, but still managed to smile. "Oh no, ya got it wrong. It's you and the whole rest of the world that talks funny."

"Yeah, well, maybe you got a pernt," he teased.

She leaned toward him. "You say it point," she said, enunciating the word clearly and correctly.

Joe's mouth made an enlightened "O," then he grinned.

"I hope you don't mind me stoppin' by so soon after the last time," she apologized. "I know I said I wasn't gonna come for a while, but I was just on my way to Washington to do a little sightseein', and I said to myself, I said—why don't you stop in and see Joe?" She gave a light shrug. "Odds are he ain't goin' nowhere."

Joe laughed, delighted at the innocence of her remark. Most people would have said the same thing sarcastically, but she was sincere. "Yeah, I canceled my 'round the world walking tour 'cause I thought you might just wander by," he grinned.

She looked at him uncertainly. "You makin' fun of me?"

He widened his eyes in mock innocence. "Who, me?" Then he grinned. "Yeah, maybe I'm makin' fun of you a little." He almost called her 'Brooklyn,' but stopped himself at the last instant, remembering that his nickname for Clarence was the same one that Clarence had used for Pam.

"All kiddin' aside, though," she said. "Are ya feelin' any better, honey?"

"I don't feel anything one way or the other," he admitted. They got the right stuff slidin' through that needle, I guess. Anyway, while I'm layin' here, I think about getting home and back to work and that helps. I talked to my mentor today—" At her look of confusion he revised his terminology. "My old dance teacher came by and talked to me."

She brightened. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I could tell by the look on his face that he didn't believe I was gonna be back on my feet any time soon, but I will be."

"'Course you will be!" she enthused.

"Anyway, thinking about things like that helps my...my mental outlook."

She nodded. "Yeah, I know what ya mean. Clarence told me that you like to dance. Is that what you're gonna do when you get home? Are ya gonna dance again?"

He was surprised by her straightforward assumption that dancing wasn't lost to him. Everyone else he'd voiced his intentions to had either looked embarrassed or had quickly changed the subject. Especially Jacques.

"Yeah, that's what I'm gonna do," he answered. "I trained all my life for it, so it's really all I know."

"I wish I could dance," she sighed. "I've got two left feet."

"Ahhh," he scoffed. "I could teach you how to dance."

"Could you?" she brightened.

"Sure. Nothin' to it. It's usually the people who say they can't who do the best. It's the people who think they know it all already that are hard to teach."

She settled back in the chair. "Clarence says you taught him how to dance once."

He'd almost forgotten. "Yeah," he said, a trace of surprised remembrance in his voice. "It was just this little nothing kind of a dance 'cause he said he wanted to try. Took a while to teach it to him—a free half hour here and there—but he was good. He smiled at a memory, only a few months old. "We did it for some guys when we were on shore leave. I taught Clarence how to dance to that song that came out not long ago, "I Begged Her." You know it?"

She grinned and nodded. "Oh yeah, that's a cute one!"

"Well, it was playin' on a radio in this place we were stayin' at, and when it came on, we were just kinda singin' along, foolin' around, and I went into the dance, just kinda natural like, and Clarence jumped right in. He was great."

Pam smiled. "Wish I coulda seen it."

Joe gave her a sympathetic look. "How about you? Are you okay?"

Pam shrugged. "Some days better than others. You know how it is."

"Yeah," Joe said. "I know."

"Worst time is when I forget. I start thinkin' like I did before 'bout how swell it's gonna be when he comes home. Then I remember that he ain't comin' home. It's times like that that are the worst, 'cause then it's like livin' it all over again from the top. Hearin' he was gone, I mean." She gave a self-conscious shrug and looked down. "I'm gettin' used to it, though."

She looked up with a little smile. "I brought ya somethin'."

"What, another Silver Star?" he teased.

"Hey, how many do you think he got?" Pam asked. "No, I brought you somethin' my old lady made. I told her about you, layin' here all busted up and feelin' blue 'cause of Clarence, and 'cause Susie's so far away. She felt bad, Ma did, so she made this for ya. I hope ya like it."

She reached into the bag and extracted two loaves of homemade bread and three jars of jam.

Joe's first reaction was annoyance. He almost said the first thing that snapped into his mind: *I got a machine gun bullet the size of your fist through my gut. You think I can eat something like that?* But he stopped himself. Odds were that she had no idea how extensive his injuries were or how he'd been wounded. Besides, she was Clarence's girl. He didn't want to be rude to Clarence's girl.

She sat the loaves and jars on the nightstand beside his bed.

"Tell your mother I said thanks," he said. "It was nice of her."

Pam smiled and nodded. "I'll tell her ya said so." She stood. "Well, I guess I better go. My train pulls out in a half hour and I got just enough time to make it if I leave now."

Joe nodded, alternately grateful and disappointed that she was leaving so soon. "Are you really going sightseeing in Washington?" he asked.

"Nah," she sheepishly admitted. "I just wanted a good excuse to come see ya. I hope ya don't mind." She sat again, slowly. "I know it sounds silly, but bein' with you makes Clarence seem alive again somehow, too. I can't explain it. Maybe it's because the two of you was such good friends, or maybe it's cause you were there when it happened. But I like talkin' to ya." She shrugged. "'Sides, I think you're a swell guy. You'd have to be a swell guy to be Clarence's friend, wouldn't ya? And it makes me feel terrible to think about how bad you got hurt, and to think that you're here all alone goin' through all this and you don't even have Susie here to keep you company." She gave him a hopeful glance. "If it's all right, I'd like to come from time to time, just to say hi and talk. But only if it's okay, and only if my comin' and talkin' don't make you feel bad."

He hesitated, then gave her a small smile. "Come anytime you want. I like talkin' to you."

"No foolin'?" she asked hopefully.

"No foolin'."

Pam stood. "Okay, then, I'll come. I can come down on Saturdays and Sundays. I can come tomorrow, if that's okay."

"I'll clear my schedule."

"Aw, quit yer foolin'," she grinned. She leaned down and brushed his cheek with a kiss. "You get better, kid, understand? You got a lotta dancin' to do."

Joe was beginning to understand what Clarence had seen in this silly little dame.

Pam returned the next day, as she promised. "Gin!" she chortled as she threw her cards down on Joe's bed and leaned forward to give him a smug grin. "That makes six in a row! That means I'm world champ!"

Joe stared at the cards in disbelief, then he transferred an indignant glare to her. "How do you keep doin' that!"

"Doin' what?" She polished her fingernails on the collar of her pink dress. "Beat the pants offa ya every single time we play cards, ya mean?"

"Yeah!" he exclaimed. "I think you're cheating!"

She pointed at herself with an incredulous look and wide eyes.

"Don't give me those baby blue eyes!" he laughed. "You know what I'm talkin' about!"

"Well, I never!" She pretended to be royally insulted as she scooped the cards up off the bed and began to shuffle. But after five seconds she gave him a mischievous grin instead. "Wanna play poker for stakes?"

He roared in protest, prompting his nurse, who was walking past the room, to stop and look in.

"Wow," Pam approved, thoroughly impressed. "You hollered like that and you got a bad lung!"

He scowled. "Yeah, so you better learn real fast how to play fair before I get better and can really holler or you might go deaf."

"Oh sure, tell me another," she snorted.

"She's got a marked deck!" Joe protested to the nurse.

The nurse grinned. "From what I understand, that's the only way to win when someone plays cards with you, Mr. Brady."

Joe looked crestfallen.

"Play nice," the nurse recommended and left.

Pam laid the cards aside, braced her elbow on the bed and her chin in the palm of her hand. "Tell me somethin', Joe."

"What, how to play fair?"

Pam smirked. "No. Tell me if you're worried. About the surgery on your back in a few weeks, I mean."

Joe feigned indifference. "Nah, I've been under the knife so many times the last few weeks that I feel deprived if I go without it longer'n a few days. Besides, Susie'll be here, and that'll make it easier."

Pam sighed and nodded. "She's a swell girl, all right. But you know? I wish...well, never mind, it's none of my business."

"What?" Joe pressed. "What were you going to say?"

"Promise you won't get mad?"

"I couldn't get mad at you even if I worked at it."

"All right. I was just thinkin' that it's too bad she can't be here with ya more often. It would make it easier for you."

Joe made a gesture of dismissal. "What for? Nothing she can do except sit around and watch me get thinner. Anyway, this surgery's gonna be a piece of cake. Just a little repair work, that's all."

Pam sat up straight and gave him a knowing look. "Don't kid a kidder, mister. If you don't wanna talk about it, that's one thing. But I don't mind listenin' if you need an ear. Honest, I mean it."

Joe hesitated, then sighed. "Well," he admitted. "Maybe I'm a little worried. A dancer's got to be in great shape, y'know, and I...well, I know it's gonna turn out all right, but I get worried sometimes is all."

"Honey," Pam said, "after all you've been through, nothin's gonna stop you. I really believe that."

"I believe it, too," he said. "Susie's bein' great about all this. In some ways this is gonna be harder on her than on me. She's got a career to think about, and now she's got to worry about me, too."

"What worry!" Pam protested. "I know all about you, Mr. Wouldn't Let Anybody Help Him With Anything Even If It Kills Him! She snorted. "'Fact I think you're gonna give Susie more trouble by tryin' to do too much by yourself!" She sat back in her chair. "She oughta be here for ya more often, though. I'm sorry to say that, but she really oughta."

If anyone else had made the charge, Joe would have been angry. But he wasn't mad at Pam. How could he be, he thought, after she'd proved herself such a friend?

"She's got a contract," he explained. "And she can't just get around it any way she wants to. I know how that is. It's like bein' in the Navy. You can't do what you want whenever you just decide to."

"What're they gonna do, throw her in jail if she comes to visit her man who's sick in the hospital?" Pam demanded. "If Clarence hadn't been killed—if he'd landed in the hospital like you are now—I'd've given up everything I had to be with him every single day! Susie don't know what it's like to get that telegram, Joe! She don't know how good it is that she can come and see ya alive, and be with ya, and help ya through the rough times! She don't know!"

Remembering her lost sailor reactivated her waterworks.

Joe felt like crying, too. "Pam, honey, you gotta understand. Show business isn't like anything you know about. Trust me." He remembered his own life as a performer. His whole life had been taken up with rehearsals or performing. There had hardly been any time to eat or even go out with dames, or much of anything else. He knew what Susie's new life was like and he didn't hold it against her. But to his amazement, he didn't hold it against Pam, either, for being indignant with Susie on his behalf.

He took her hand. "Listen," he said. "I know you'd have been there for Clarence, 'cause you've been here for me. But Susie's with me in another kind of way." He tapped his chest lightly with his other hand. "She's in here." He tapped his forehead. "And she's up here. And I know she feels the same way. She might not be here in person, but she's here in all the ways that matter. You understand what I mean?"

Pam nodded, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand. "That's how it is with me and Clarence," she said. "That's how it is even now." She blinked back blurry tears. "Clarence isn't here in person anymore, but he's with me all the time in all the ways that count. I know exactly what you mean, Joe. I know."

Joe nodded. It was time to bring this to an end before he started to bawl, too. "Hey," he suggested. "Aren't you gonna miss your train, kid?"

She glanced reluctantly at the clock on the stand beside his bed, nodded, and stood. "I'm gonna be here when you have surgery," she said. "You think Susie will mind?"

"No, you're not comin' back here when I have surgery," he corrected. "They're gonna knock me out and I won't come 'round again for the rest of the day. I'm gonna sail right through this one. Don't miss a day's work, and I mean that."

She snorted disdainfully. "What's work?"

"It's dignity," he said, understanding that as he never had before in his life. "Work is dignity and purpose and identity."

She laughed through the last of her tears. "Joe, for Pete's sake, I work at a dimestore lunch counter!"

He laughed, too. "I don't care, it's still dignity. You go to work and when I wake up I'll give you a call and tell you how it all went, how's that?"

She nodded. "You won't forget?"

"'Course I won't forget."

She nodded, then leaned down to kiss his lips lightly. "You make good and sure you come through it all as easy as you say, you understand?"

"Aye-aye, Admiral."

"Tell Susie I said hello, will ya?"

When she was gone, Joe settled back against his pillows. "Clarence," he murmured, glancing up at the ceiling. "I gotta hand it to ya, buddy—you know how to pick 'em right."

"Okay, boys and girls, that's a wrap!" the director announced. "Finally!"

A cheer of relief went up from the overworked film crew when the director made the announcement. The as-yet-unnamed musical had been the victim of every kind of disaster, from a flooded set, to an extra breaking a leg when he slipped on the sound stage, to the actress with the stunning operatic voice blowing take after take because she was worried about her hospitalized fiancee.

But now it was over, and Susan was so relieved that she could have cried.

"You are coming to the wrap party?" Haverfield insisted.

Susan grabbed her coat from where it was draped over an unused camera and firmly shook her head. "Not this girl! I'm taking the first train to Washington, and from there it's a taxi to the National Navy Hospital!"

Haverfield frowned with disapproval. "After all we've been through these last few weeks? I won't hear of it! Besides, you're the leading lady and you're expected."

His tone was teasing, but Susan knew that he was right. As the star of the picture, it would be terribly bad-mannered not to appear at the wrap party, but...

"Oh, John," she sighed. "I'd love to go, but Joe's been so patient all these weeks and I told him that I'd be there as soon as I—"

"If he's been patient this long, then a few more days won't hurt," Haverfield protested. "Take the next train, or take one out in the morning. Susan, I insist. You've worked too hard not to enjoy this party and all the congratulations that go with it. If Joe is as wonderful as you say, then he's not going to mind. What are you trying to do? Punish yourself because you're healthy and he isn't?"

Susan was shocked. "Of course not!"

"Then come."

Susan wavered. It had been a hard shoot, though it had been fun, too. She couldn't remember when she'd ever enjoyed herself more. John Haverfield had been wonderfully patient with her, showing her the ropes when he thought she needed it. And he'd proved himself a good friend, too—seeing her home in the evenings, listening to her talk about Joe and Clarence, listening to her dreams of the future.

Was attending this party too much of him to ask, she wondered, after all the support he'd given her?

"I suppose if it's only a few hours—" she murmured.

"That's my girl!" Haverfield grinned. "Now, hurry over to the telephone and make your call, but do it quickly! I'll wait for you in the foyer, so don't be long!" He kissed her cheek, grinned, and left her to her business.

Susan bit her lower lip, feeling guilty, then with a sigh she walked to the phone and dialed.

"National Naval Hospital," the switchboard answered.

"This is Susan Abbott. May I leave a message for one of your patients, please?"

"I'll be glad to put you through to the room if you like, ma'am."

"Oh no, that won't be necessary," Susan said quickly. "If you'd just relay a message for me, that will be fine. Please tell Mr. Brady in Room two-eleven that shooting has gone into overtime and that I won't be coming in tonight after all. Tell him that I'll take a train out tomorrow evening and will see him just a day later than I'd planned."

"I'll let him know."

"Thank you."

Susan replaced the receiver.

"See?" a voice behind her said. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Susan whirled, startled.

Haverfield stood behind her, arms folded, a look of approval on his face.

She laughed, embarrassed. "John, you frightened the life out of me! I thought you were waiting in the foyer!"

"Ah, Susan!" he reproved. "You know I can't stay away from you that long!" He extended his arm. "Shall we?"

Susan smiled and accepted his arm.

Susan couldn't remember ever laughing so easily.

John Haverfield, playing the mime, walked an imaginary tightrope for the party goers—an act he'd originally performed at the dawn of time in vaudeville—though he'd have rather died than admit it. He exaggerated every movement, teetering perilously on the edge of nothing as though it were a rope hundreds of feet off the ground, grimacing with either horror or relief, depending upon the degree of his make-believe peril.

The partiers applauded and laughed. It wasn't often that the dapper, dignified John Haverfield played the clown, but tonight he was proving himself a pro.

Tears of laughter rolled down Susan's face and she was laughing so hard that she could barely breathe.

Haverfield finally gave it up. He stepped off his invisible tightrope, gave a bow, and scooped Susan up into his arms. "Thanks to this wench, I just plummeted thousands of feet to my death!" he laughed.

"Oh but it was such a spectacular fall that people will be talking about it for years!" someone shouted.

Haverfield grinned. "I demand that my next role be a comedy. I absolutely demand it!"

Susan laughed with delight.

Haverfield grinned at her and gave her a quick kiss. In the month that he'd known Susan Abbott he'd progressed from thinking of her as a conquest to seriously considering himself her suitor. She was the most beautiful, intelligent, and talented woman he had ever known, and he'd known a great many.

That Susan was as obviously enchanted with him as he was with her encouraged him. She was still committed to the fiancee languishing God knew where in a hospital, but Haverfield had begun to notice that the longer he and Susan worked together, the less often the name "Joe" came up. When it did, it was always accompanied by looks of worry.

Haverfield resented Brady, not only because he stood between Susan and himself, but because he made this beautiful, wonderful woman so sad.

Somewhere at the back of his mind he felt guilty for feeling such things. Susan had told him the whole story of her whirlwind romance with Brady, and also of her visit to the Pacific where Brady had been badly wounded, and how he was now facing surgery after surgery in an attempt to regain some semblance of a normal life.

But Susan admitted that Brady would be handicapped the rest of his life, lucky if he even got out of a wheelchair for a few hours a day—a fact he didn't know yet, and which would fall to Susan to tell him.

Susan's eyes would cloud when she talked about Brady, her happy expressions would melt into sadness, and Haverfield found himself wishing with his whole heart that Brady would do himself and Susan a favor and simply die.

It was a terrible thing to think, and Haverfield knew it, but he didn't feel guilty for it. He considered himself a patriotic man, and though he hadn't served in the military himself, he was a supporter of those who did.

But there were limits to his devotion to God and country, and Joe Brady was that limit. There was no way Haverfield was going to allow this beautiful young woman to spend the rest of her days growing harried and old worrying over a helpless cripple.

"You," he laughed, kissing her cheek as he set her on her feet, "are turning me into a degenerate! There's not another soul on earth who could get me to do the things that you do! There's a party at my home after we leave here, you know. I'd love to have you there as my guest of honor."

Susan looked at him wistfully. "I do wish that I could come, John," she sighed. "You don't know how much."

"Then come. You're not planning on leaving for Maryland until tomorrow night, anyway."

Susan gazed at him uncertainly, then she nodded and smiled.

"Joe! Joe!" Donald flew at the bed with a happy shout, and for an instant Susan thought he was going to forget all that he'd been told about being careful.

But Donald skidded to a stop at the bedside and snapped a salute at his happy, grinning uncle-to-be.

"As you were, sailor," Joe said seriously.

Susan, standing in the doorway, was shocked at Joe's appearance. In the four weeks they'd been apart, he'd become skeletal.

Why, he's thinner than Clarence! she despaired. Somehow, in her mind's eye, she always thought of him as the cocky, handsome sailor who'd swept her off her feet. That had only been six months ago, but this man—emaciated, with his large eyes filling too much of his face—bore little physical resemblance to her romantic bandit chief.

If Donald noticed the difference, it didn't seem to matter. "Joe," he cried. "I got to ride on a train!"

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," Joe answered, "'Cause your legs woulda got awful tired if you'd tried to run over here without one!" He grinned beyond Donald to the person he'd been waiting for. His grin expanded so widely, and his eyes shone so brightly, that for an instant Susan saw the young man she'd fallen in love with.

"Oh, honey," he breathed, "if you ain't a sight for sore eyes!"

Susan smiled, hurried into the room, and leaned down to kiss him. If his appearance was contrary to memory, his kiss quickly confirmed his identity. No one, Susan had long ago concluded, could kiss like Joe Brady.

"Mush," Donald complained, burying his face in his hands.

Joe grinned. "Better get used to it, sailor, you're gonna be seein' a lot of stuff like this!"

Donald groaned.

"Darling, you look—" Susan began, then hesitated.

"Like hell," Joe finished. "Don't I know it. But it's all surface, baby, all surface. Joe Brady's still livin' inside here somewhere, trust me!"

For an hour they sat together, Donald snuggled up on the bed at Joe's side, careful not to jostle him, Susan sitting in a chair beside the bed, holding his hand.

Joe was content to listen to Susan. She was excited about making her movie, and since he didn't have anything to tell her in return, except that there were exactly one hundred and twelve tiles in the ceiling—one of them was cracked—he listened.

"And darling," Susan finally finished, "when you come home, I've got a room all ready for you. It has a nurse's station and a beautiful view of the garden. "I've hired a gardener to come three times a week just to make certain it stays that way, too, just for you."

Joe didn't care about gardens. "What

about our room?" he asked. "You know, the kind two people share after they get married." He meant it to sound like a joke, but once the words were out, he realized that it sounded more like sour grapes.

Before he could apologize, Susan said, "It's just while you're recovering, Joe. I was only thinking of you."

Joe grimaced. "Yeah, I know. I didn't mean it to sound that way." It was time to change the subject before he put his foot in it again. "Susie, listen, I meant to tell you—I wrote this thing," he said, indicating the notebook on the nightstand beside his bed. "I'm no writer, so it's gonna need an expert hand, but I thought, maybe, if you think it's any good you could let somebody at the studio see it and tell me if it's got a chance."

Susan picked the manuscript up curiously. "What is it?"

"Story about me and Clarence," he answered. "You know, the shore leave story. The one about how we met."

Susan looked up in surprise. "Really? I was just telling John the same story!"

Joe scowled. "John who?"

"John Haverfield! Oh, Joe, really! You remember I told you we were in the last film together! They're putting us together in the next one, too—he's wonderful! Think of it, Joe! Whoever would have imagined that when you and Clarence got me an audition at the studio that I'd be playing opposite John Haverfield one day!"

Joe fought down jealousy. "He's pretty good-looking, that guy," he said, trying to sound casual.

Susan wrinkled her nose and tousled his hair. "Not half as good-looking as you, sailor." Before he could answer, she skimmed ahead. "I'd love to show your script, sweetheart. It's a wonderful idea, and I'm surprised I didn't think of it first!"

Joe's jealousy evaporated in the face of her enthusiasm for his pet project. "Give it the once- over yourself first. You don't have to do it here and now. In fact, I'd just as soon you took it home with you and read it there when you've got some time to yourself, so you can really read it without any interruptions. You know what else we gotta talk about?"

"What?"

"The wedding." He made a disappointed face. "I don't think we're gonna make the date we set, are we?"

She sighed and shook her head.

He looked at her a long moment. "Susie, you know you don't have to go through with this if you don't want to."

He held his breath, afraid of her response, but her look of surprise was so genuine that his fear vanished.

"I mean," he hastily added, "things have changed, and I don't want you to feel like you've gotta or—"

She interrupted him by giving him the most passionate kiss she could manage with a six-year- old in the same room.

Donald groaned anyway. "Are you guys gonna do that all the time!" he wailed.

When Susan let him up for air, Joe grinned down at the boy nestled on the pillow beside him. "I already told ya so!"

A knock on the door made them look up.

Leesburg stood in the doorway.

A thrill of alarm shot up Susan's spine. Leesburg had waited for her to tell Joe the truth. Now, Susan realized, he was here to make sure of it.

"Hey, Doc!" Joe beamed. "Look who just wandered by!"

Leesburg smiled and entered. "You may have saved his life by cheering him up," he informed Susan. "The staff is ready to murder him."

Susan gave Joe a look of mock astonishment. "Darling! It's so unlike you to annoy people! I can't believe it!"

"Miss Abbott, I'd like to speak with you alone for a few moments, if you don't mind."

"Aw Doc, no—" Joe protested. "We've waited too long for—"

"Only a few minutes," Leesburg interrupted. "I need to go over a few things with your fiancee, then I'll quickly return her."

Susan stood, nervously wringing the strap of her purse. "Does it have to be now?"

Leesburg sighed. "I think you've waited long enough."

Joe looked from one to the other of them, mystified. "You two talking in code?"

Susan bent to kiss him. "I'll be right back. Come with me, Donald."

"Aw!" Donald protested.

"It's okay," Joe said. "Leave him here. I haven't had a chance to really talk to him."

"Yeah!" Donald agreed. "Besides, sometimes the men just gotta be alone without any women around!"

Joe nodded. "Yeah."

Susan put a hand to her mouth to hide a laugh, but she quickly recovered. "Okay, then, I'll leave you two he-men alone to talk things over. I'll be back shortly."

"Okay, she's gone!" Donald said excitedly when she had left. "You can show me where you got shot now!"

"Whaaaat?" Joe exclaimed.

"I wanna see where you got shot! Aw, c'mon, Joe!" He grabbed Joe's pajama top.

Joe laughed and caught his hands. "Kid, listen, I—" He didn't know how to explain that surgery had left him with an impressive railroad track of a scar, but no tangible bullet wounds suitable for impressing six-year old boys. Then he realized that there was nothing more fascinating to a boy of six than something as hideous as a good scar. It was guy stuff that no female would ever understand. "Okay, you asked for it," he said, and quickly lifted his pajama top, just enough to give the boy a peek, then he just as quickly lowered it again.

Donald's eyes went as wide as twin moons. "Wowwww," he breathed. "Wowwwww! Let me see again!"

Joe somehow kept a straight face. "Nah, nah, one peek to a customer. But that's the best scar you'll ever see, buster."

"Yeah!" Donald agreed, thoroughly impressed. "Wow!" He grasped Joe's arm, his eyes excited. "What did it feel like to get shot, Joe?"

Joe opened his mouth to answer, then realized that he didn't know. "You know what? I don't remember."

"Huh? But you got that scar!"

"Yeah, but your brain does funny things when you get shot or something like that. You forget what it feels like."

Donald refused to be unimpressed. "Well...were you scared?"

"Who, me?"

"I would've been scared."

"Sea wolfs don't get scared," Joe bluffed.

Donald looked at him earnestly. "Do you think my daddy was ever scared?"

"Kid," Joe answered, "I'd make a thousand-dollar bet that your dad was never scared of anything."

Donald beamed. "That's what I think, too. You know what else I think?"

"What?"

"I'll bet that Daddy and Clarence are friends now because they live in the same place. What do you think?"

The innocent remark threw Joe off guard. The last thing he'd expected was for Donald to mention Clarence. But he nodded and managed a smile. "I bet you're right, kid. I'll bet they're talkin' their heads off."

Donald smiled and snuggled back against his pillow. "Joe?"

"What?"

"Did Clarence ever meet the mouse king?"

Joe glanced down at him, recognizing a plea for a story when he heard one. "Sure he met him."

Donald sat up. "When? When did he meet him?"

"Well," Joe began. "It was right after the mouse king gave all the people in his kingdom permission to sing and dance. Everybody was real happy about that, of course, but they had a problem. They hadn't done any singing or dancing for so long that they didn't remember how! The mouse king came to me and asked me to help, but even though I could dance and could show the people how to do *that*, I was never much of a singer. So I thought and I thought. And then I remembered Clarence."

Donald peered up at him. "Clarence sang me to sleep, remember?"

"Sure, I remember! Why, Clarence was one of the best singers in the whole world! He used to sing in a big church and you know that if you're gonna sing in church in front of a lot of people you have to be really good."

"I was at Clarence's church," Donald said. "That's where they buried him."

"Yeah, that's right," Joe said softly. "That's the very same church." He hesitated, then continued. "Can you help us?" the mouse king asked Clarence. "Will you teach us how to sing? We don't have any pianos or organs or flutes, because you see, it's been so very long since the people have done any singing that we don't have things like that anymore."

"They didn't have any music at all?" Donald asked in wonder. "Not even on the radio?"

"Not even on the radio. In fact, they didn't even have radios! But that didn't bother Clarence, 'cause Clarence knew a secret."

Donald was enthralled. "What secret?"

"Well, Clarence knew that music was any kind of a happy sound, like birds singing, or the way the wind rustles through the leaves on the trees, or the sound kids make when they laugh. Kids like you!"

Donald giggled.

Joe grinned. "So, you know what Clarence did?"

"What?"

“He stood up on the stump of a big oak, and he held his hands up like Mr. Iturbi does when he conducts the orchestra, and everybody got very still and very quiet. Then Clarence brought his hands down, real slow-like, and the whole forest began to make music. The crickets chirped, and the owls hooted, and the humming birds hummed and the rabbits thumped their feet. And it was the most beautiful orchestra anybody had ever heard. It was even nicer than Christmas carols or the songs Aunt Susie sings to help you go to sleep at night. It was just like music from heaven. And then Clarence started to sing, and everybody was surprised that somebody as small and sorta shy-looking as Clarence could sing with such a great big voice. Pretty soon everyone was singing, and the whole forest was filled with the happiest sounds. And they're still singing, too, ‘cause Clarence made the mouse king and all his people so happy.”

“And did you dance?” Donald asked.

Joe nodded. “Sure I did. In the mouse king's kingdom, Clarence will always be singing, and I'll always be dancing. And you know something, kid? We're never gonna stop—not either one of us.”

“Joe, darling?” Joe looked up with a grin to see Susan and Leesburg standing in the doorway, but his grin faded when he saw the look on Susan's face. She looked pale and sick.

“Mr. Brady,” Leesburg said as he entered the room with Susan in tow. “I need to speak with you.” He turned to Susan. “Miss Abbott, it might be wise to have someone take your nephew to—”

“Donald's nanny is already on her way here to take him back to the hotel,” Susan quietly answered.

Joe had a sudden terrible feeling that he didn't want to know what Leesburg had to say.

Joe listened stoically, without interrupting, as Leesburg explained everything to him, exactly as he had to Susan.

When the physician was finished, Joe gave him a hard look. “You sit there, all nice and calm, and tell me you've got me on a drug that's gonna turn me into an addict. You tell me I'll never dance again—won't even walk again without crutches. You're a real ray of sunshine, Doc!” His voice caught, and Susan's heartbeat quickened at his desperation.

“Now I'll tell you something,” Joe continued bitterly. “I worked my way up without anybody's help or any handouts. I got to the top of my profession when everybody told me I couldn't, and that I was wastin' my time. And I got through three years of war when everyone around me, including my best friend, was killed. Don't tell me I can't do anything I want to do. If you want something, you go for it! I'm gonna walk again. I'm gonna dance again!”

“Mr. Brady,” Leesburg calmly answered, “It is my responsibility as your physician to lay the facts out to you as I recognize them. I understand your fears and denial, and I sympathize—”

“Swell. You hear that, baby, he sympathizes—that makes everything fine! What the hell good is the back surgery going to do me if I can't walk or dance again! Why even bother?”

“Without surgery, you will remain in bed for the rest of your life,” Leesburg answered. “With it, you'll be able to walk with support.”

“What kind of support?”

“Crutches and a brace. But only for short periods at a time.”

Joe glanced desperately at Susan, but she couldn't meet his eyes.

“Isn't that just great?” he choked. “And here I thought he was gonna give me bad news. Why for only short periods at a time?”

“Because there has been extensive damage to the muscles in your back and shoulders that we can only moderately repair by surgery or with exercise. You don't have the strength to support yourself for long periods, even with artificial aids.”

“You're wrong,” Joe said, “I don't believe you.”

“I know you don't believe me,” Leesburg answered. “But I can't understate the severity of your condition whether you choose to believe me or not.”

Joe blinked to keep back tears of panic and desperation. “What about this damned drug you've got me on?”

“The drug,” Leesburg continued, “has not become a danger to you yet.”

“Then get me off of it!”

“You'll have to be weaned from it gradually. Your system has been weakened by your injuries and by surgery, and your pain level is too high for you to tolerate removal at this stage. If we were to take you off the morphine now, you couldn't bear the pain—and you have another surgery yet to come. The law and ethics dictate that the amount of morphine we're dispensing to control your pain not be utilized to any patient to the point of addiction. We're well within the limits."

"Take me off," Joe demanded. "Do it right now."

Susan gripped his hand hard. "Joe, please, think about this. The doctor says it isn't dangerous yet."

"I don't need to think about it," Joe said without taking his glare off of Leesburg. "Nobody's gonna turn me into an addict with a needle in his arm."

Leesburg shook his head. "It's not like that at all, Mr. Brady."

"Yeah, well it's like that to me. Get this thing out of my arm. How many times do you want me to say it!"

Leesburg stood, nodded, and summoned a nurse in the doorway, who'd obviously been waiting.

Joe raised a cynical eyebrow. "You think you know me pretty good, don't you, Doc?"

"I'm beginning to," Leesburg said quietly. To the nurse he said, "Please remove the IV from Mr. Brady's arm."

Joe experienced a thrill of panic as she proceeded, but it didn't show in his face or eyes, though his grip on Susan's hand increased. He wasn't fooling himself. He knew what kind of shape he was in, and he knew there was going to be pain...probably a lot of it. But he'd faced pain before on a daily basis when he'd danced. If he was going to start getting better, and prove to this quack of a doctor that he would be okay, then he was going to start right now.

As the needle was withdrawn he dropped Susan's hand, closed his eyes, and laid his head against the pillow, waiting.

Fifteen minutes passed, a half hour, forty-five minutes. He thought about dancing. It was a beautiful art, built on pain and determination and the pursuit of excellence. He forced himself to remember the times his feet had bled, and the way his legs and back had cramped until he collapsed.

But always, Jacques Chevenmon stood over him, shouting at him to keep dancing, no matter the pain. The goal was far more important than anything as temporary and insignificant as pain.

After fifty minutes, the first twist of rapier-sharp spasms lanced through his back and shoulders, inching by slow degrees through his ribs and up his spine. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut and clenched his teeth.

"Joe," Susan whispered.

Joe concentrated on Chevenmon, picturing the elegant Frenchman standing in *front of him, pressing him on. Only when every muscle in your body has been abused past endurance will you reach perfection.*

Through the flowering, expanding anguish, Joe heard him clearly.

You will never dance greatly, you will never be great, you will never achieve your goal by giving into weakness. You must block pain, not only from your mind, but from your very soul, Joseph. How many times must I tell you this? Only when you understand what I'm saying and why will you be a true master.

The agony consumed him, grasping him in fingers of flame and acid. He swirled within the eye of it, allowing the tornado of sensation to fly him high and fast. "Oh, God!" he cried.

Susan stood quickly. "Stop it! Stop it now!"

Joe saw Jacques watching him, his taskmaster's face set in determined lines. *There is no stopping if you wish to succeed, Joseph. There never has been. How badly do you want this?*

Joe sobbed, but in his mind, he danced. The alternative was to never dance again, and that was unthinkable. The higher the funnel of pain took him, the greater the pressure on his back and sides became. The music in his mind escalated, became faster, more violent until he had no choice but to dance harder, higher, quicker.

Jacques challenged him, taunting him to try harder, to be better, to reach greater heights.

"I *am* dancing, damn you!" Joe cried, anger consuming him even more than his pain. "I—am—dancing!"

"That's it," Leesburg snapped. "Put him back on."

Susan glared desperately from her delirious fiancee to the nurse who hurried to fulfill Leesburg's order.

Oblivious now to Susan's presence, they worked to stabilize their patient. A nurse injected morphine, then injected him again with a sedative. After only a few moments, Joe relaxed. He gave a great sigh and his head fell to one side against the pillow.

Leesburg turned to Susan. "He'll sleep for a while now. When you see him next, he'll be in no pain, I promise you." He smiled at her sympathetically. There was no color in her face, her eyes were wide and terrified, and she was shaking.

"Miss Abbott," Leesburg said, "you may not believe me now, but what just happened was a positive step in the right direction."

Susan stared at him, shocked. "Positive!"

Leesburg nodded. "We've cleared a major hurdle. He won't fool himself any longer. Now we can begin to work on helping him to really help himself."

Appalled, Susan stared down at Joe. She was shaking badly and realized that she couldn't stop. What Joe had just done was one of the most heroic things she'd ever seen, but the ugliness and desperation of it had shocked her to her core.

For the first time she fully realized what she and Joe were up against.

And she also realized, with shame and self-loathing, that she wanted to run away from this nightmare of suffering and hopelessness.

And she wanted to run away from Joe.

Joe was subdued when Susan saw him the next morning.

"I have a surprise for you," she said, pressing her lips coyly and smiling as she sat beside his bedside. "They let me bring you breakfast this morning."

He gave her a sideways glance, still too embarrassed to directly meet her gaze. "Swell," he muttered. "Chicken broth. Lately I wake up at dawn and crow."

Susan reached into her purse and pulled out a jar of Gerber's baby applesauce. "Ta-da!" she beamed.

He stared at the jar, then at her. "What the hell is that?"

"Breakfast. I just told you, weren't you listening?" She unscrewed the top.

He watched her suspiciously. "If you pull out a bib and bottle of milk next, you're outta here."

She forced a laugh and he could tell that she was doing her best to put on a good face. *For an actress she's doing a lousy job,* he thought.

"Dr. Leesburg told me this morning that he's encouraged by how well you're recovering from the surgery on your innards, and that you're ready to start eating lightly," she said as she handed him the jar and a spoon. "Now aren't you happy?"

He eyed the jar disdainfully, then set it on the nightstand beside the bed. "I'm sorry you had to see what happened last night."

She sighed. "I'm sorry you were in such terrible pain, but Dr. Leesburg says it won't always be like that. He says you have to give your body time to heal before you try something like that again, and when you do, any discomfort you may feel will be tolerable."

He closed his eyes. "It's not gonna work. I can't dance, I can't make a living. Dancing is all I know." He cracked his eyes open to look at her. "You really like what you're doing, don't you, Susie? You're really having a ball with this movie stuff."

Her eyes brightened. "Oh, Joe, it's wonderful."

"I'll bet there are a lot of parties."

Susan looked at him curiously. "I suppose there are."

"With everyone dressed to the nines, huh?"

She smiled. "That's a Hollywood law."

"Sure," he said. "But how're you gonna feel comin' into a party with me? You'll have to push your husband into the joint in a wheelchair, then keep a good eye on him the rest of the night to make sure no one mistakes him for a piece of furniture. That might take some of the fun out of it."

Susan stared at him, appalled. "Joe—"

"Funny thing," he said. "The truth, I mean. It's got sort of a nasty ring to it sometimes."

Susan was embarrassed without knowing why. "Feeling sorry for yourself isn't going to help either one of us," she reproved. "You've got to start thinking positively."

He looked at her sharply. "I'll tell you what, baby doll, you think positively. I'll just lay here and be honest."

They sat together in silence for while. Finally Susan stood.

"I have to leave to pick up Donald," she explained. "One of Dr. Leesburg's staff gave him a tour of Washington so that you and I could be alone together this afternoon. I'll bring Donald back tonight and we'll have dinner together."

"I hope you like Gerber's strained applesauce," Joe muttered.

Susan didn't return that evening.

Joe awoke the next morning, feeling ashamed; his face burned with it. He felt no less despondent over his plight, but he decided that Susan was right. Feeling sorry for himself wasn't going to do him any good, especially if he really wanted to marry Susan and make her happy. And he did want to marry her, even more than he wanted to dance. It was his last dream and his last chance to feel like a whole man.

The more he encouraged himself, the more his handicaps began to seem like challenges—something to work around.

No more whining, he reproved himself. *Now we storm the beaches.*

When Susan arrived later that morning, he was ready with an apology, but Susan's announcement beat him to the punch.

"Sweetheart, I've been called back early," she announced as she entered his room with Donald in tow. "It seems the studio needs publicity shots, of all things, and it's something that I can't get out of." She sat beside the bed and laced her fingers through his. "I'm so sorry."

"Sue...Susie," Joe stammered. "This doesn't have anything to do with the things I said yesterday, does it? 'Cause if it does, well, you were right. I was feeling sorry for myself, and I—"

She laid a finger across his lips. "It has nothing to do with that at all. I'll be back in two weeks, and I'll certainly be here when you have the surgery on your back. Then we'll have several weeks together before I begin work on the new picture."

His eyebrows soared in surprise. "You've got a new picture already?"

"Word came through last night, that's why I didn't get back here to say goodnight. By the time I was off the phone with the studio it was well past midnight, and I knew you were probably exhausted. In any case, I'll give the studio your script and we'll see what they think. It's a wonderful story."

He tried not to sound disappointed. "It's got a great leading lady, anyway."

"And two knights in shining armor."

"Two bumbling idiots in bellbottoms, you mean."

Donald tugged on Susan's sleeve. "Aunt Susie, I could stay here and take care of Joe while you're gone."

Joe grinned, then gave him a look of mock indignation. "Hey, what makes you think I need somebody to take care of me, bub?"

Donald gave him a savvy look. "Well, you sure don't look very good to me!"

"Donald!" Susan reproved.

Joe peered down at the boy. "You just wait a few months, kid. You'll have to work real hard to keep up with me."

Donald's eyes lit. "Then we'll go to the Navy Yard?"

"Sure, sure, then we'll go to the Navy Yard." He glanced back at Susan. "Give me a call when you get home, just to let me know you got there all right."

Susan nodded. "Of course. And I'll call often, Joe, I promise."

"Sure you will," he said. "And just so I won't miss your call, baby doll, I promise not to go anywhere."

Joe had never intended to tell Pam his bad news. She was struggling hard with Clarence's death and he didn't want to add to her worries by telling her ***his*** sob story.

But there was something about Pam that always made Joe tell her everything, whether he wanted to or not. And it was just as well, he supposed, because she could read him like the daily funny papers, anyway, and she always knew when he was hiding something.

When he called her only hours after Susie left, and asked her to please come, she was out the door and on her way in an instant.

He'd only intended to talk and tease with her the way they usually did. He didn't mean to tell her about Leesburg's prognosis or what had happened when they'd taken him off the drug.

But when he let it slip, she cried, and it was all Joe could do not to cry, too—not because of his bleak future, but because Pam really seemed to care. He couldn't remember anyone ever crying so sincerely for him before.

But by the time she'd gone through three handkerchiefs, Joe couldn't bear her sorrow any more. To cheer her up, he told her the funniest stories about Clarence that he could think of.

Pam fell back in her chair, all her grief and pent-up emotions escaping as laughter as he talked. "So, then what happened?"

Joe laughed, too, glad that Clarence's memory was finally creating laughter instead of pain. "What happened?" he repeated. "I'll tell you what happened! That little bantam rooster jumped on Smitty's chest while I was gettin' my face turned into creamed spinach by those other two guys, and he started poundin' on him like he was John L. Sullivan!" Joe laughed harder and wiped tears from his eyes. "Hey, Pam!" he chortled. "You know what?"

"What?" she laughed, wiping tears of her own.

"It's a good thing I can't feel anything or I have a feeling that all this laughing would make my insides feel like hell!"

It seemed to both of them the funniest thing that anyone could ever say, and it set them off on another round of hysteria—at least until a stern-faced nurse put her face in the doorway and insisted that they keep it down. Didn't they know there were sick people trying to rest?

Joe put a finger to his lips. "Sssssshhhhh!" he cautioned Pam, spluttering with laughter despite himself. "What's the matter with you, you dippy dame? Makin' all that noise!" He gave the nurse an apologetic look. "She did it, not me. Because, as we all know, I'm the ideal patient."

The nurse snorted. "When hell freezes over." But she smiled anyway, wagged a warning finger, and left.

Pam tried to look serious. "Well, how was I to know that there'd be sick people listenin' in?" she protested.

"Yeah, how would you know that there'd be sick people in a hospital, of all places?" he snickered, then exploded again.

He was drunk and he knew it. They both were. Drunk with the release of repressed feelings, mutual affection, and with the first positive emotions they'd both felt since God knew when.

Joe vaguely realized that Pam was sitting on the edge of the bed with her face buried in his blankets as she tried desperately to control her laughter.

Finally, somehow, they both settled down into a state of merely semi-hysterical good spirits.

"Hoo, boy!" Pam hooted, settling back in her folding chair again. "If I'd known that coming to the hospital was so much fun I'd have done it a long time ago!"

Joe groaned, then he began to giggle again. "Don't," he begged. "Please don't get me started by sayin' Pam things!"

"Pam things!" she protested. "What the heck is that?"

He chortled and felt himself slipping over the edge again. "Oh you know, like last week when you told me that when you were a kid you thought that they were singing about a cross-eyed bear named Gladly in your Sunday school!"

Pam threw her head back and laughed. "It was ten years 'fore I knew that the song was really called, "Gladly The Cross I'd Bear!"

That started them again, but it took less than two minutes this time for the nurse to come in. "Mr. Brady," she warned. "I'm delighted that you're feeling so happy this morning, but if you don't shut up, I am going to personally pick you up, carry you down this hallway, and drop kick you out onto the front lawn!"

"Promises, promises," Joe grinned, but he nodded. "We'll be good."

"Promises, promises," the nurse mimicked, but she smiled and ducked out again.

"See, you got me in trouble again," Joe protested to Pam. "You're always getting me in trouble, woman!"

"Aaah, you get into enough trouble all by yourself and ya don't need *me* to help ya! Clarence told me that much about ya!"

"Whaaaaat?" Joe protested. "What trouble did I ever get into when Clarence was around?"

"Well," Pam said. "How 'bout the time you told Susie that Clarence had fixed her up to have an audition with Jose Iturbi?"

"Oh, that," Joe scoffed.

"Okay, then how about the time you got beat up on the ship because that guy put Susie's picture on his locker?"

"Any self-respecting, red-blooded American sailor would have done the same thing."

"The time you went AWOL 'cause you were in a crap game on shore and the guys wouldn't let you go 'cause you owed 'em money?"

"Hey, I got back before the brass hats caught me."

"Then how about the time you—"

"Hey," Joe protested, screwing up his face in frustration. "Didn't Clarence ever talk about anything except me when he wrote to you?"

"'Course he did, but that's none of your business."

"Aaaah, mush," he teased.

"Like you wouldn't know about mush."

"Like I'm the expert on mush, girlie, and don't you forget it."

"Like undisputed champion, huh?" she grinned.

"Like nobody in forty-eight states can touch me."

"Like nobody in forty-eight states would want to!"

"Hey, what is this, insults? Where's your respect? I'm a sick man!"

"In more ways than one."

It was wrong, and they knew it. It was going to get them into terrible trouble and they knew that, too. But they both started to laugh again, and the next time the nurse came in, she politely but firmly escorted Pam out.

"I'll be thinkin' about you when you

have your surgery, Joe!" she called over her shoulder as she was unceremoniously thrown out.

"Good, but don't come! You hear me? Don't come, it's gonna be a piece of cake!"

"Yeah, yeah, I hear ya. See ya next time, Valentino!"

""When!" Joe called after her.

"Whattaya think I am, made of money? When I can afford the train fare! Sheesh!"

Joe laughed again as she disappeared in front of the disgruntled nurse, who no longer thought their bout of happy hysterics was amusing.

Joe laid his head against the pillow and grinned. Then he began to hum *Gladly The Cross I'd Bear.*

Haverfield drove Susan home, then sat with her in the driveway, behind the privacy gates of her large home, talking, feeling like an adolescent, and wondering when it would be appropriate for him to try and kiss her. Preoccupied with his thoughts, he didn't listen to what she was saying.

"Are you listening, John?" she finally asked.

He shook himself mentally and, embarrassed, looked across at her. God in heaven, he thought, she was even beautiful after a brutally hard thirteen-hour day working under hot lights. "I'm sorry," he smiled. "I was caught up in my own selfish thoughts." He slipped an arm around her shoulder.

Susan nodded. "I was saying that it's been so much fun working with you that it hardly seemed like work at all. I'm so glad that we'll have a second chance. I think it would be wonderful if you met Joe. I know you'd like one another. In many ways you're very much alike. Did I mention that Joe was an entertainer, too, once? He was a professional dancer before he went into the Navy."

Haverfield sighed and removed his arm from around her shoulder. "Yes, you've told me. Repeatedly. You've also told me that he's handsome, enchanting, a little rough around the edges, but adorable anyway, and that he doesn't have a chance in hell of ever living a normal life again for the rest of his days. Is there something I've left out?"

He could have kicked himself the moment the words were out, but to his relief, Susan didn't flounce angrily out of the car as he expected. Instead, she sat beside him in silence for several awkward seconds, looking embarrassed.

"Susan, I'm sorry," Haverfield apologized. "I didn't mean to say that, not any of it."

Susan shook her head. "No, I should be the one apologizing. I suppose that I have...I suppose I do talk a lot about Joe, don't I?"

"Not as often as you used to," he said. "But I understand. You're in love with him, so naturally you're going to talk about him. That's one of the things that makes you as special as you are, Susan. As much trouble as he's been to you, and as much trouble as he's going to be, you still love him."

Susan looked surprised. "Joe could never be any trouble to me, no matter if he was hurt ten times worse than he is now. If you only knew him. If you only knew what a good man he is, and how brave he's been."

Haverfield nodded. "I'm sure he's good and I'm sure he's brave and I'm sure that you love him and that he loves you even more." His face softened and he tilted her chin up gently with his finger. "Any man who didn't love you would be an imbecile. But my dear, lovely Susan—have you ever stopped to think that at this time in his life you may not be the best person for him?"

She stared at him. "How can you say a thing like that?"

"Because I'm truthful," he sighed. "It's a bad failing of mine and it's always getting me into trouble. I'm going to risk getting myself into trouble right now by telling you that Joe's demands are eventually going to require more from you than you'll be willing to give. No, don't interrupt me. Let me finish and then you can order me off of your property if you like. Right now Joe's injuries have been contained. He's in the hands of experts who look after his every need, keep a close eye on him in case something should go wrong, control his pain. It's a full-time job that takes a team of professionals."

"It won't always be that way," Susan protested. "He's come a long way already! And I've already arranged to have a live-in nurse here to take care of him."

"Oh, for heaven's sakes, Susan," Haverfield said in exasperation. "It goes deeper than live-in nurses and carefully prepared medicines. If he does improve, will he be any more capable of earning the kind of salary that you do?" He made a sound of frustration that had nothing to do with Brady, and everything to do with himself. Why couldn't she see that this relationship with a crippled man was insensible?

"From everything you've told me," he continued, "Joe's a proud man. Will he be willing to sit at home in a wheelchair with a nurse feeding him gruel, watching from the sidelines as you become more successful and more famous? How will he cope knowing that you make more in three months than he could ever make in a lifetime...if he's capable of work at all any more, that is. Are you that willing to humiliate and insult a man that you claim to love? Susan, I know that all of this sounds cruel, but I'm looking at things objectively—in the same way I would if I were in his place, and I don't think I could bear it."

For a moment she couldn't speak. "You don't understand," she finally stammered. "You don't understand about Joe and me. You don't know what we've already been through together."

Haverfield was saddened by the desperation in her voice, but he was also encouraged by it. She was trying to convince herself, not him, and he knew just by looking at her that everything that he'd just said had already occurred to her.

"Have you thought, sweet girl, that he is no longer the man he was when you met him?" he asked. "He can never again be that young man you met seven months ago."

Susan shook her head firmly. "You're wrong."

Haverfield refused to let her speak. "Even more importantly, Susan, has it occurred to you that you are no longer the same person that you were seven months ago? Tell me, honestly, what are your real feelings when you think about Joe? Is it love? If it is, then it's love for a man who doesn't exist any more. It's remorse now, isn't it? Remorse that you can't be there for him as you'd like to be. Remorse that he's been hurt so badly and that so much has been taken from him. And if you're honest, Susan, you'll admit that facing a lifetime of caring for an invalid in a wheelchair is not something you're looking forward to."

Susan's eyes flashed with anger and indignation. "How dare you sit there and talk about things you know nothing about!" she raged. "How dare you try to tell me what Joe means to me, when you don't even know him, and how dare you try to tell me how I feel!" She was too livid even to cry. "Joe's best friend died saving my life!"

"But we're not talking about Joe's best friend," he whispered. "We're talking about you. There's only one way you could ever repay that debt to Joe's friend, anyway, and that's by living."

Susan began to cry and Haverfield drew her gently into his arms. "You do love, Joe," he whispered. "But you don't love him the way that you think you do. Not any more. The love you felt for him seven months ago was for another man. The love you feel for him now is obligation and guilt. Do you think that's what he wants from you?"

Susan trembled in his arms.

"Susan, I love you," Haverfield whispered. "I love you." He expected her to pull away, to finally leave him in a flurry of anger and confusion.

Instead, to his astonished joy, she wrapped her arms around his neck and embraced him as her tears fell harder and faster.

And Haverfield understood. Gently he kissed the top of her head. "You love me, too," he whispered.

Susan nodded, unable to speak.

Haverfield drew her even closer. "You love me," he whispered. "Thank God you love me."

She wasn't coming.

Numb with disappointment and hurt, Joe placed the phone receiver back on the cradle. Tomorrow morning he'd be undergoing the most important surgery of his convalescence, and Susan wasn't coming.

Her voice had sounded strained, he thought, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that she wasn't saying what she wanted to. What was she waiting for? he wondered. To see if he came out of the surgery alive? He had a terrible feeling he knew exactly what she wanted to tell him, and wasn't.

Instead, she had been apologetic, she had been remorseful, she had been the epitome of regret, but she wasn't coming. She was very sorry, darling. Did he understand? Yes, she'd give Donald a hug for him. Yes, she'd be thinking of him every moment that he was in the operating room. It was time to run. She was already late for reshoots and if she kept the crew waiting, it could run into thousands. Goodbye, darling, and good luck.

Goodbye and good luck. Joe sighed and rubbed his tired eyes.

He was tired of being understanding. He'd been tired of being understanding when she'd first told him about that heel, Haverfield, but this went beyond that.

Susan was treating tomorrow morning's surgery as though it was going to be easy. *Just another walk in the park...except I can't walk,* he thought.

Good luck, she'd said.

Once, he knew, he'd have felt comfortable telling her that he was scared, but now he had the feeling that if he tried to tell her that he was afraid that he might not wake up from surgery, she'd interrupt him to tell him that she was due on the set and that she'd talk to him about it later.

Joe laid awake in the darkness for hours, thinking about Susan and what she meant to him. He had fallen in love with her very nearly from the first moment he'd laid eyes on her, though it had taken at least a day for him to admit it to himself. He'd never admitted to Clarence that the reason he hadn't wanted to go back to the house on Foothill Drive the night after they'd met her was because his attraction to her had been so strong that it had threatened him. He loved her not only for her beauty and talent, but because she was a good person and he'd known very few genuinely good people in his life. Clarence had been one, Pam was another, but to his mind, Susan was the best person he had ever known and his love for her had been a consuming passion of both heart and soul.

But as he lay awake, only hours from surgery, he realized something else. Susan had changed. In so many ways she was still the same Susan, and yet in so many others...

He made a sound of frustration. He'd blinded himself to what was happening, he knew that now. Pam was right. Susan should have been here for him. She should have found a way. He'd spent God knew how many weeks cut off from the outside world, facing a lifetime of uncertainty and restrictions that he still didn't know how to cope with. He'd have given anything to know that she cared enough to want to be with him—or to even write or call more often. He knew it was selfish of him to expect so much from her. He knew how important her career was—he would forever mourn the loss of his own.

But after examining his heart from every perspective, after weighing one thing against the other, he decided that even if he had been the most famous dancer in the world with the most stringent contract, nothing...nothing would have kept him from being with Susan if she had ever been hurt or in trouble.

Nothing.

Towards dawn his nurse came in to prep him for surgery.

"Can you give me an extra fifteen minutes?" he asked.

"Mr. Brady, the doctor is waiting and he—"

"Please, it's important. Just fifteen minutes."

The nurse hesitated, then sighed. "I'll ask the doctor, but you're not the only surgery he has today. Don't be surprised if he says no."

Joe nodded. "Thanks."

When she was gone he picked up the spiral notebook at the side of his bed and the pen lying on the nightstand.

Dear Susan, he wrote. *I'm going into surgery in a few minutes, and I wanted to write this before they knock me out. I don't have much time, so please don't think this letter is short because I'm holding grudges or because I'm mad. Honey, I could never be mad at you. Susie, baby, you know you mean the world to me. If I could have been in Clarence's place, I'd have gladly given my life for you, but I don't have to tell you that. You know how much I love you, and you know how much I always will. Because of that what I'm going to write is probably the hardest thing I've ever said in my whole life. Honey, I'm letting you go. I'm cutting you loose from a lifetime of worrying about taking care of a man in a wheelchair. I'm cutting you loose from wondering how you're gonna make time for me* *and* *your career. I'm not fooling myself, honey, and I don't want you to, either. The road ahead ain't gonna be easy. God knows what's gonna happen, but one thing is for sure—I'll feel like a third wheel waiting for you to find time in your life for me...and for us. I'm not blaming you for that...God knows I'm not. But that's the way it is, and if you're honest with yourself, you'll know that what I'm saying is the truth. I've still got my pride, but I won't have if we don't cut it off. So, I'm saying goodbye, here and now. Please, don't call me when you get this. Sit down, think about what I'm saying, accept the truth of it, and please, Susie—if you respect me, don't contact me again. I'll understand.*

Give my love to Donald...and give him a sock on the arm for me, too. You don't have to tell him I'm not coming home. He'll get used to the idea all by himself in time, and pretty soon *it'll just be natural to him.*

Joe hesitated. *I'll always love you, baby doll...always,* he concluded. *And I'd like to believe that you still love me, too. But honey, our lives are just too different now for us to make a go of it. You know it, don't you? Good luck to you, too, baby, in everything that you do. Love, Joe.*

As he signed his name, the nurse returned. "Mr. Brady, I'm sorry, but Dr. Leesburg says—" she paused, mid-bluster, surprised by the strong emotion on his face.

"It's okay," Joe said. "I did what I have to do already. Can I ask you for a favor?"

The nurse nodded.

"My fiancee's address is in that book by the bed. Will you fill out an envelope for me and see that this letter goes? Fastest way possible. It's an important letter, and it has to go out today. Will you do that?"

The nurse took the sheet of notebook paper from his hand and nodded. "Certainly, Mr. Brady. I'll see that it goes out by the next post. But now..." She tucked the letter into the belt of her uniform and pushed the tray of syringes, needles, and other unfriendly looking medical paraphernalia ahead of her until it stopped beside his bed.

"Now it's time to go to sleep, right?" he concluded.

"How very clever you are." She smiled, extracting a needle from the tray and raising it to check the level.

"Nah, I'm just an old pro at this, that's all," he said. He watched as she slid the needle home, then he glanced up at her. "That letter's very important."

"I know," she assured him. "I'll make sure it goes out today, don't worry."

It was the last thing he heard before darkness descended.

Pam burst through the double doors of the hospital and skidded into the reception area.

"Is anybody ever gonna tell that girl that this is a hospital and not the training ground for the U.S. Olympic running team?" one nurse asked another.

Pam ran past them in the direction of Joe's room, but she was pulled up short by the head nurse. "Whoa, whoa, honey, slow your propeller. Brady's not in his room."

Pam looked at her out of wide eyes, her chest heaving with the exertion of her run. "He's not havin' his operation already, is he?"

The nurse glanced at her watch. "Fifteen minutes now."

"Damn!" Pam shook herself free and clenched her fists. "My train was late! I wanted to be here to wish him good luck!" She grasped the nurse's arm. "Where's Susie?"

"You mean Miss Abbott?"

"Yeah, yeah, where is she?"

"She's not here," the nurse said.

Pam didn't believe her. "Whattaya mean she's not here? You mean to tell me she wasn't sittin' there at Joe's bed, holdin' his hand or somethin' when they knocked him out?" She calmed herself as she realized what the problem must be. "She's probably just late, then, like I was."

The nurse sighed. She had a busy day ahead, and this funny little kid wasn't making it go any faster. "Miss Abbott called Dr. Leesburg and said she wouldn't be here, that's all I can tell you. Now, sweetie, if you want to sit here and wait 'til Brady comes out of surgery, that's up to you, but he's gonna be in there for at least four hours, and I guarantee you that he'll be asleep for the rest of the day and through the night. Why don't you go home and come back tomorrow? He'll be more alert then."

Pam pressed her lips stubbornly and shook her head. "I'm not goin' anywhere. If Susie's not comin', then I'm gonna play backup. You just show me where the coffee pot's sittin', where the bathrooms are, and where I can sit down and I'll just wait."

Pam sat in a spot where she was told she could see when they brought Joe back to his room. "Is somethin' the matter?" she fretted to the nurse after a few hours had passed. "It's takin' longer'n you said it would."

The nurse was beginning to warm to her. The girl showed a lot more concern for Brady than his movie-star fiancee ever had. "Sometimes it just takes a little longer, that's all," she reassured Pam, patting her arm.

"What're they doin' now?" Pam asked. "Are they puttin' that thing in his back like he told me they were gonna? He doesn't feel anything, does he? I mean he's sleepin' real good and everything, right?"

"Sleepin' real good," the nurse grinned. "Don't worry so much, honey, he's going to be in better condition when he comes out than he was when he went in."

It seemed longer than six hours to Pam. It gave her too much time to think about things. For one thing, she'd lost her job that morning to come to the hospital. The manager had warned her that if she didn't come, she didn't have to bother ever coming in again. Bad enough, the manager said, that she'd inconvenienced the staff by asking for three days for her boyfriend's funeral.

Losing the job didn't bother Pam too much—she knew her mother would let her come back for a few weeks until she landed another job. But it was what Joe had said about work being dignity and identity that bothered her. She had a terrible feeling that somehow she'd let him down.

Beyond that she thought about Clarence, and wished that he'd had a chance like Joe was getting now.

But her thoughts always returned to Joe. It was only natural, she thought. Joe was the one in the operating room. Joe was sure a swell one, and he didn't deserve a speck of all the terrible things that had happened to him. *It's always the good ones,* she thought. *Always the best people who get it in the neck, never the mean ones. What's the matter with Susie, anyway, not bein' here when he needs her so bad? You wait 'til I see her. I don't care what Joe thinks, I'm gonna tear her up for not bein' here. Poor Joe. He really loves that girl, and I'm not so sure she loves him back, anymore. If she did, she'd be here for 'im.*

She sighed and settled back, attempting the impossible task of getting comfortable after six hours sitting in a wooden chair.

Finally, the doors opened and a gurney wheeled through. Pam glanced up with only cursory interest. There had been dozens of patients through that door throughout the day. She didn't expect this one to be Joe any more than any of the others had.

But it was.

"Joe, honey!" she yelped as she jumped to her feet.

The attendant taking Joe back to his room hesitated long enough for her to peer down into his sleeping face. He looked terrible, she thought with mounting panic. There wasn't a speck of color in his face.

Pam nearly cried out with renewed grief and fear. He looked lifeless and unnatural.

"He's just asleep," the attendant assured her, interpreting her fears from the look on her face. She looked up at him, reminding him of a frightened rabbit. "Is he gonna be all right?"

The nurse who'd helped her find a chair and had told her from time to time what was happening to Joe in the operating room, moved up beside her. "He's going to sleep a good long while, and when he wakes up he's going to feel pretty lousy. But after that, it's all downhill, sweetheart, don't worry about that." She grinned and squeezed Pam's arm. "One thing I've learned about this guy is that he might be down now and then but he's never out of the game." The nurse followed the attendant down the hall and into Joe's room.

Pam trailed behind, not sure whether they'd allow her to stay with Joe in his room until he woke up, but one thing she knew for sure. If they wouldn't let her stay in his room, she'd sit in the lobby until he woke up, even if it took days.

But they did let her stay, though it was against hospital rules. She rarely took her gaze off his face, tracing and retracing every line and angle with her eyes. He was as thin as a skeleton, she thought. Skinnier even than her Clarence had been, and so weak looking. He needed somebody to love him and take care of him, and she had the worst kind of feeling that Susie wasn't that person. If she were, she'd be here now, sitting beside Joe's bed, watching him breathe, loving everything about him, from the way his eyebrows made his eyes look wider than they really were, to the way his nose turned up just a little bit on the end, and the way his mouth curved like he was smiling even when he wasn't.

Pam caught her breath as the warm, rich feelings of love she'd felt for only one other person in her life spread through her, from the top of her head to the souls of her feet. Gently, afraid that if she touched him he'd wake up, she brushed the side of his face with the back of her hand. "I love you," she whispered. "Oh Joe, I'm sorry, honey, but I love you."

Joe awoke the next morning feeling as though he'd been run over by a fleet of Navy convoys. He had no time to appreciate the fact that Pam was there. It was hard for a guy to be grateful when he was vomiting. His head felt like it was put on with grenades that went off every time he drew a breath, and he wondered why his handy-dandy, heavy-duty, addictive painkillers weren't doing their job. If this surgery had been meant to improve the quality of his life, he had some bad news for Leesburg.

But by mid-afternoon, life began to feel better. He managed to give Pam a smile and curl his fingers around her hand as he drifted off to sleep.

It was nice, he thought as his eyes closed, that she was there. She was one in a billion, this silly little dame, and it was no wonder Clarence had been so head over heels for her.

By the morning of the second day, he was fully awake. Pam had gone for breakfast and Leesburg took a seat beside his bed. "You look very nearly human again, Mr. Brady," he smiled.

"Wish I felt that way," Joe groaned. "I think I felt better when the cannon fell on me."

Leesburg chuckled. "You'll feel better in just a few hours. We'll have a long talk later today about what you can expect in the future, and about those exercises we discussed to strengthen your legs and lower back. Right now, I have other things to discuss with you. You're due for discharge in four weeks. I've been unable to reach your fiancee, but she had mentioned to me that she was planning on hiring a nurse to help you as you make the transition from patient to functional human being again."

Leesburg smiled.

Joe didn't. "Doc, I don't have a fiancee any more," he said. "Susie and me...well, it's over between us."

Leesburg wasn't surprised. He'd noticed Susan Abbott's gradual lack of interest in his patient. "I'm very, very sorry to hear that, Mr. Brady."

Joe gave the facial equivalent of a shrug. "Happens."

"That creates a few new problems," Leesburg said quietly. "Do you have other family members who can help you while you're recuperating? Any friends or relatives?"

"No," Joe said.

Leesburg frowned. "Mr. Brady...you're going to need help for at least a year. Someone to not only assist you with the exercises, but to be there when you try to take those first few steps. If you don't have anyone who can assist you, I...I'm very sorry to have to say so, but I'll have to assign you to a veterans hospital."

Joe closed his eyes. "A home."

"It's a full-care nursing facility," Leesburg corrected. "Several of my veterans without families to look after them have gone there while they recover. You needn't worry about the expense, the Navy is taking care of that."

"I can take care of him," a quiet voice behind them said.

Leesburg turned to see Brady's friend, Pam, standing in the doorway.

Joe's eyes flew open in surprise. He'd thought she was in the cafeteria having breakfast. Had she overheard what he'd told Leesburg about Susie? She'd obviously overheard that he was being sent to a nursing home.

Pam cautiously entered the room. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to listen, but I can take care of Joe if he needs it and he don't have nobody else."

Joe thought of a few responses he could have had: indignation, embarrassment, stubborn pride. Instead, he felt a rush of warmth and gratitude. "Brooklyn," he stammered.

Pam stood beside his bed and took his hand. "I can do it," she told Leesburg.

"Kid, you've got no idea," Joe protested. "This isn't like helpin' somebody get over a head cold. And, sweetheart, you don't owe me nothin'. If you're thinkin' of doing this for Clarence, then I—"

Pam sat quickly on the edge of the bed and took his hand. "It's not for Clarence, it's for you. Joe, I'll always love Clarence, just like you'll always love Susie. Don't tell me you won't, cause the kind of love you had for her, and the kind of love I have for Clarence, ain't the kind that ever goes away in one lifetime. But I—" She dropped her gaze and stammered. "But I love you, too, and it's not a Clarence kind of a love." She looked up, her eyes swimming. "It's a Joe kind of a love." She shook her head. "You don't have to love me back, I'm not expectin' that. But if I can help ya, then I want to. And not because I owe it to you or to Clarence or to Susie or to anybody else, but just because I want to. You understand?"

"Well, then," Leesburg said to Pam, "I need to speak with you. I still recommend that Mr. Brady spend time in a full-care facility until he can sit upright in a wheelchair and attend to own his basic needs. But we can discuss that later. Right now I'll give you time alone."

When he was gone, Joe shook his head. "Pam, it's too much," he protested. "I can't ask you for this."

"You're not askin' me for nothin,'" she insisted. "It's not gonna be like livin' with Susie, though, Joe. We might have to live with my ma for a while. Don't look like that, I know she won't mind. My old lady's one in a million and you're gonna love her. And it won't be forever. Soon as I can, I'll get us a place of our own. If you wanna help out a little with your pension, that'll be great." She giggled suddenly. "We'll make all the neighbors talk about how we're livin' in sin!"

Joe snorted. "You won't have to worry about that...at least not for a while."

Pam inclined her head. "Someday, maybe, you think?"

There was such hope in her voice that Joe laughed, astonished to realize that he was in love with her. The magnitude of his feelings for Susie had kept him from recognizing his feelings for Pam, but now that the cloud was removed, he realized that he'd been in love with Pam for a while, and just hadn't realized it.

He smiled. "Look, I got an idea. There's no sense in shocking the neighbors. As long as we're gonna be livin' under the same roof, you wouldn't want to..." he sighed, hesitated, then plunged ahead. "You wouldn't think about maybe, oh, I don't know...maybe marrying me?"

Pam's whole being lit up from within. "You're puttin' me on!" she yelped.

"Why would I do that!" he protested. "If you love somebody, you marry 'em, don't ya? And I love you, Brooklyn." He raised his eyebrows at her shocked look. "Yeah, that's right, I love ya! You got somethin' to say about it?"

Pam laughed and clasped her hands. "You bet I got somethin' to say! I'll marry ya, crazy, and I'll tell ya why! It's not 'cause you're the best-lookin' guy in the east, or 'cause you think you're hot stuff. It's 'cause nobody else is dumb enough!" She laughed again and leaned down to capture his face between her hands as she kissed him.

He was impressed. "You didn't learn how to kiss like that from Clarence," he grinned.

She looked modest. "So I read a lot. Anything wrong with that?"

Joe laughed.

And he had a wonderful feeling that there would be far more laughter in his life from now on than tears.

He was going home.

ELEVEN MONTHS LATER

"Will ya stop lookin' at yerself in the mirror already? Ya look gorgeous, Romeo, okay?" Joe Brady's future brother-in-law, Sheldon, threw his hands out in exasperation as Joe turned in front of the mirror for the tenth time in three minutes, judging his reflection from every angle.

The black tuxedo eloquently accentuated his trim, firm physique, made strong again after months of unending, diligent, and often painful rehabilitation. The back brace he wore beneath his tailored jacket was barely discernable, and only the slightly unnatural stiffness of his stance and the crutches he used to support himself gave away his handicaps.

He turned away from the mirror. "You sure?" he asked Sheldon in concern. "I mean, you really can't tell?"

Sheldon looked innocent. "Tell what?"

Joe snorted. "I should know better than to ask you questions that need straight answers."

Sheldon's head came up sharply as something caught his attention. The unkind thought occurred to Joe that Sheldon suddenly looked like a basset hound who'd scented dog chow.

"Hey, we gotta get out there, we're late!" Sheldon yelped. "They started the music and that means the wedding waltz'll begin and we'll be outta place!"

"Wedding march," Joe corrected.

"You sure?"

"I used to be a dancer, you think I don't know the difference between a waltz and a march?"

"So, okay, don't get testy! Sheesh!"

"Look who's talkin.' Shellie, calm down, will ya? It's my wedding."

"Yeah, but it's my kid sister!" He grinned. "I still say she's marryin' a bum."

"Thanks."

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon." Sheldon started to grab Joe's arm, remembered abruptly, and threw his hands up in frustration. "Can't you just use the chair to get down to the front 'er somethin', then pull out the crutches, Brady! We're late, already!"

Joe sighed. "Sheldon, kid, one of the whole reasons Pam and I waited this long to tie the knot instead of doin' it in the beginning was so I could walk down the aisle, get it? The chair's retired today, got it? Good."

"Okay, all right, but just hurry, will ya?"

For Joe, 'hurry' was a relative term, depending upon how strong he felt on any given day, or whether his back was causing him pain. The orchestra had been forewarned that they were likely to have to play several renditions of the pre-march before the groom finally made it to the front altar.

But Joe surprised them—and himself. With Sheldon's help, he adjusted the crutches more securely beneath his arms, lifted himself as straight as he could and stepped out.

Sheldon hovered on one side of him, and when they walked out into the sanctuary, Pam's cousin, Bill, hovered on the other, but Joe held his own.

The church was full. Every parishioner from Clarence's church, including Clarence's mother and sisters, had turned out to see Joe and Pam married. In a way, Joe knew, it was an end of mourning for them. They knew, the same way that he and Pam knew, that Clarence would be glad to have Joe taking care of Pam, and Pam watching out for Joe.

It had been a long road. A hard one, filled with tears and pain and frustration and failure, finally culminating in lasting success. He was even off the morphine. After a few weeks, Joe had come to realize that the horrible pain he'd experienced without it had been as much a result of his mental dependence upon the drug as his physical need.

Pam had seen him through that nightmare, too, and though he was never completely free of discomfort or pain, he'd learned to live with it, and he thought more highly of himself for being free of any dependencies, mental or physical.

He wasn't in pain today.

Finally, he was at the altar.

Sheldon leaned forward to whisper. "You want to sit down, kid? You okay?"

"I'm okay," Joe whispered back.

The wedding march sounded behind them and Joe swivelled on the crutches to see his bride come down the aisle.

Did I ever really think there was anyone more beautiful? he marvelled.

In her white gown, Pam was the most enchanting vision he'd ever seen. She wasn't a movie star, like some people he'd known, but looking like she did now, all decked out in lace and flowers, Joe was convinced that no one—movie stars included—could ever look more breathtaking.

She kept her gaze on him as she marched, grinning at the look of love in his eyes, and when she joined him at the altar he committed the sin of lifting her veil with one hand to kiss her cheek.

That caused a disapproving stir among certain parties, but Joe didn't care. He and Pam had been married a long time before this, he thought. A marriage of heart and soul and commitment. The rest? He'd have shrugged if he'd been capable. The rest was just formalities.

They recited their vows, and Joe kissed his wife.

The orchestra was big and brassy, playing nothing but Glenn Miller tunes because Miller was Pam's favorite bandleader. Pam sat at the head table with her new husband and noticed how intently he watched the dancers on the floor. "They doin' it right?" she leaned over to ask him.

Joe scowled. "Not one of 'em."

Pam laughed and patted his arm. "You looked like a regular walkin' fool marchin' down that aisle today," she grinned.

He returned the grin. "Yeah, I didn't look half bad, did I?"

She sighed in exasperation. "All this time I live with the man and he still don't know when I'm fishin' for compliments."

Joe's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, oh, yeah, right. You looked pretty spiffy yourself, Brooklyn. Pretty spiffy."

"Spiffy, yet."

"What, you want beautiful, maybe? All right, you got it. You were knock down, drop dead, all-out gorgeous, honey, and that's no joke." He kissed her and got approving reactions from anyone in the reception hall who noticed.

"It's a good thing we're leavin' 'em all here when we get back to the hotel," Joe said. "Or we'd never get anything done."

"The way you talk! You're gonna make me blush."

"You don't know how. Besides, you're the one who embarrasses me, remember?"

She snorted. "I know."

"I've got something for you."

"What?" she grinned. "A wedding present already?"

"Sorta." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a corsage of orchids. "A mutual friend of ours once told me that you liked these better than bottles of beer," he said.

Pam's breath caught as he pinned the flowers to her gown. "Clarence," she whispered.

"Yeah, Clarence," Joe said. "He's here, you know that, don't you?"

Pam nodded and smiled. "I know he is."

Joe turned his attentions back to the dance floor again. After a moment, he grimaced and leaned sideways to whisper to Sheldon, who was sitting on his left.

Sheldon looked at him in surprise. "You puttin' me on, Brady?"

Joe looked annoyed. "Just for once,

Shellie, do somethin' without askin' questions, will ya?"

Sheldon sighed, shrugged, and stood. "Okay, it's your funeral." He stood and left the table.

"What did you tell him?" Pam asked.

"Just wait," Joe said. "It's another wedding present."

Pam watched with uncertainty and suspicion as Sheldon trotted over to the bandleader. She saw him glance back at Joe, point, then whisper something again. After a moment, the bandleader nodded. He turned to his orchestra, stopped them from playing, then faced his audience.

"It is now time, ladies and gentlemen, for the bride and groom to have the floor," he said.

Pam's mouth flew open in surprise and she looked at Joe, who was already reaching for his crutches. "Joe, honey—" she began to protest.

He stood with Bill and Sheldon's help and adjusted the crutches beneath his arms. "Mrs. Brady," he said, reaching down for her hand. "May I have this dance?"

Pam stared at him uncertainly, then a slow smile spread across her face. "As long as you don't step on my feet," she said, accepting his hand.

"I can't even guarantee I won't step on my own!" he grinned.

The dancers parted like the Red Sea as Pam and Joe made the slow progression onto the floor, then the orchestra launched into a slow waltz. Pam wrapped her arms securely around Joe's back, supporting him with her weight as he swayed in place with her, occasionally shifting his feet to simulate dancing.

"You know something?" he asked.

"What?" she whispered.

"I danced in some of the most famous theaters there are, I did some of the most difficult and complicated routines, and I sometimes outdanced my own masters. But no dance ever made me happier than this one does right now."

Pam smiled. "No foolin'?"

Joe grinned. "No foolin'."

"So, I'm that good, huh?"

"That's a whole 'nother subject, baby."

She snickered. "Why do I get the feelin' I just married a sex maniac?"

"Ha! Look who's talking! The marathon kisser. Two days out of the hospital and I had to hire a cop to keep you off me."

She looked aghast. "You—did—not!"

"Oh, that's right," he corrected himself. "I'm sorry, it was the third day."

"That's more like it," she sniffed. "Get yer facts straight, fer heaven's sakes!"

Pam could tell, though she was sure that no one else could, that the day was beginning to tell on Joe. His color always went a little darker when he was exhausted or in pain, and Pam suspected that after six hours of continuous celebration, he was both.

She changed quickly, rushed through the last sea of handshakes and congratulations and made Joe sit at the long wedding table while she went out to check on the car. She wanted it as close to the front as possible so Joe wouldn't have far to walk.

The car was there, as she'd asked. But so was something else.

Susan Abbott was leaning against the sedan, waiting, looking every inch the movie star from her spiked heels to the top of her professionally-styled hair.

Pam almost fell over with astonishment.

Susan laughed when she saw her and rushed forward to crush her in an embrace. "Congratulations!" she cried. "Oh, congratulations to both of you! I'm so happy for you!" She pulled back and Pam saw only sincerity in Susan's eyes.

Pam smoothed down her dress, and nodded. "I read in the newspapers that you got married."

Susan nodded. "Yes, it's been six months now, and we're very happy."

Pam nodded again, without expression. "Good for you. I hope nothin' happens to this one. If it does, maybe you better warn 'im in advance that you'll be givin' notice just when he needs ya, huh?"

Susan gasped, but Pam wasn't finished. "I guess it was a good thing somebody was there to help Joe out when you lost interest, otherwise they'd have stuck him in one o' those hospitals and he'd probably still be there."

Susan was crushed. She cast her gaze down. "I never wanted to hurt Joe," she whispered. "I loved him." She looked up again. "In many ways, I still love him. He's one of a kind."

Pam nodded once, firmly. "Yeah, one of a kind, and he's doin' swell, no thanks to you. He's walkin.' We just danced together." Her tone and defiant expression plainly said, 'So how about that!'

Susan's eyes reflected her surprise, and then her discomfort and personal regret. "I—" she stammered. "Pam, I...I don't blame you for being upset with me. I wouldn't blame Joe either."

Pam snorted. "He's not upset with you, honey. He don't even think about you anymore."

The actress winced. "You've made your point. I won't stay. But I have a wedding present for you."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Pam said. "We don't need charity if that's what you mean. We're doin' just fine."

"No," Susan said. "It's not—" she glanced towards the church, as though hoping to see Joe, then she glanced back at his angry bride. "When Joe was in the hospital he wrote a story about how we met, and about how Clarence met you."

Pam's expression softened a little. She hadn't known that.

Susan nodded. "Yes. He gave it to me and asked me to present it to the studio. I did, and a few weeks ago they decided to buy the story. I came to let you both know." She reached into her purse and withdrew a long envelope. "I thought it would be a good wedding present. It's a wonderful story." She laughed softly. "We both know that, don't we? These are the contracts. Joe should look them over, sign them if he agrees with the conditions, and contact Mr. Silvers in charge of production at MGM if he approves. They liked the script enough that they might ask him to write others, and Joe could work from here. He wouldn't have to live in California to have his scripts produced."

Pam eyed the envelope suspiciously, then took it. "Did you have anything to do with this, outside of taking 'em the script?" she asked.

Susan cleared her throat. "I might have had a little something to do with it."

Pam nodded. "Uh-huh." She thrust the contract back into Susan's hands. "Then we don't want—"

Susan's eyes flashed angrily. "Look, don't go making the same mistakes with Joe that I did! Neither one of us has the right to play God with his life! I thought I knew what was best for him, and I let him break off our relationship without ever trying to get him back."

Pam's eyebrows soared. "Whattaya mean you let him break it off!"

"He wrote me a letter," Susan said, "saying it was over. I thought it was the best thing at the time and I didn't try to stop him. But I loved him then, and I still love him. My husband is wonderful and he means everything to me, but I said it before and you agreed. There's only one Joe Brady, and there'll never be another like him." She thrust the envelope back into Pam's hands. "Don't deprive him of something he deserves. He wrote the script and it's a good one. And it does wonderful justice to Clarence and to you. They want to begin production on it and they want to begin soon. So you give that to Joe, and you let him make up his own mind!"

Susan strode angrily to her own chauffeur-driven car which was double-parked beside Pam and Joe's. "Just in case you're interested," she called back, " the script is called *Anchors Aweigh* and they're ready to cast the leads. Don't blow this for your husband by being selfish and jealous!"

It was a good parting shot, Pam had to admit, but that didn't keep her from resenting it.

As Susan's car pulled away, Pam looked back down at the contract. She turned it in her hands, considered tossing it in the nearest ditch and almost did, then realized that Susan was right. It was Joe's decision. And besides...

Pam shrugged, opened her purse and dropped the contract inside. As long as Joe didn't have to leave home, and as long as he didn't have to run into Susan very often, would it hurt that much?

She turned back toward the church to retrieve her waiting husband, her expression thoughtful. "Anchors Aweigh," she mused as she pulled open the sanctuary door. "Can't say I think much of the title."

The doors of the church closed behind her.